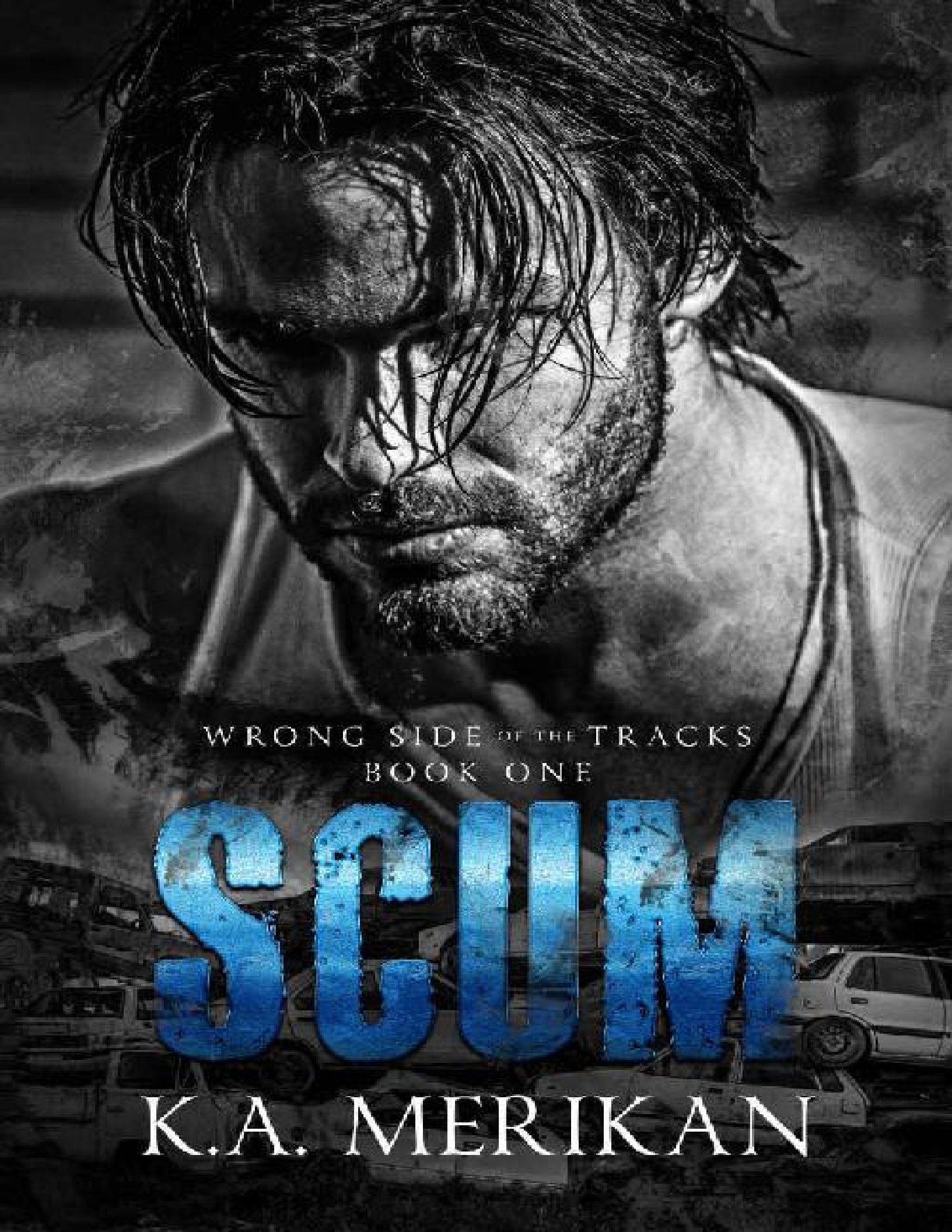




WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS
BOOK ONE

SCUM

K.A. MERIKAN

SCUM

Wrong Side of the Tracks series #1

K.A. Merikan

“10 years ago, he ruined my life. Now, I will ruin his son.”

Shane. Ex-con. No-good bastard. Scum.

Rosen. Trust fund boy. Virgin. Sucker.

Shane is straight out of prison, and has one goal only—to wreck everything dear to the man who put him behind bars. And number one on that list is Rosen, Ed Beck’s son. Shane’s plan is to incriminate the boy, but when the dreamy blue eyes meet his, Shane can think of a hundred other ways to ruin Rosen right under his father’s nose.

If Rosen’s dad is to pay for his art degree, Ros has to stay on the straight and narrow. Join a fraternity, avoid scandal, and keep his sexuality under wraps. Seems easy enough until he meets Shane, a bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. All sanity goes out the window, and the slippery slope leads Rosen down a path of violence, blackmail, and passion too sizzling to be denied.

Shane thinks he’s in control, that Rosen is just a means to an end, a tool to be manipulated. But as a love he’d never even dreamed of becomes real,

he's starting to realize he doesn't have to be the 'scum' society's been telling him he is.

Shane now stands at a crossroads, between Rosen and revenge.

POSSIBLE SPOILERS:

Themes: blackmail, revenge, manipulation, ex-con, secrets, rich/poor, class differences, age gap

Genre: Scorching hot M/M dark romance

Length: ~73,000 words (Standalone)

WARNING: This story contains scenes of violence, offensive language and morally ambiguous characters.

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Chapter 1 – Shane

Tonight, Shane would ruin two lives in one fell swoop, and he couldn't wait.

When he rode his bike, all the injustices of the world hid in the shadows, but as he pulled onto the university campus and had to slow down, reality caught up with him, scented with damp leaves and beer.

It was Halloween, and he couldn't have felt more excluded if he'd tried. Crowds of students drifting between party houses in ridiculous outfits reminded him of how different his life could have been had he been born into a wealthy family. Scoffing, he maneuvered around two girls in 'sexy convict' costumes featuring a ball and chain alongside a skimpy version of the orange overalls Shane had been wearing only last month. After seeing *that*, nothing would have surprised him anymore.

He continued down the main road through the grounds, passing cowboys, sexy nurses, Jokers (so many Jokers), sexy kittens, mafiosi, a sexy tequila bottle...

He shook his head, finally catching sight of the massive building ahead. The pale facade was being used as background for a projector casting images of flames and demons, and the lawn in front of it crawled with people.

One got used to squalor in prison, but the sheer volume of the music blasting from every direction and the uninhibited nature of the crowd ahead made Shane stall before he drove up to the curb in the not-so-quiet cul-de-sac.

If everything went according to plan, tonight would be child's play. He'd found out that his buddies often supplied the local fraternity with fun pills for parties, and it so happened that Rosen Beck, the son of the man who'd put Shane in prison, was a member. Shane had no personal grudge against the boy, but didn't give a flying fuck about him either, and had no qualms about making him a tool in his father's downfall. Having one's son in prison for drug possession and distribution served no one's political career.

Ignoring two young men who'd dressed as policemen and were trying to 'arrest' a group of giggling girls nearby, Shane parked his bike close to a massive stage that would likely feature an unholy spectacle later. He texted the club president that he'd arrived with the *treats*.

Social skills worked differently in prison, but he was still charming as fuck and would get himself invited into the massive house with Greek letters above the arched entrance. He'd scout out Beck's son and plant the drugs on him before calling the cops. Easy-peasy. As much as Shane hated the police, they'd be a useful tool tonight.

Shane barked out a laugh when the prez texted him back.

[I'll send a guy. His name is Rosen. Don't give the treats to anyone else]

Could executing his plan get any easier?

Shane relaxed, unfolding the kickstand before sliding off his silver Honda and resting his ass on the seat with eyes pinned to the frat house.

A better man would have left the kid out of this ugly business, but Shane had always been bad, and his conscience had no qualms about stepping over some rich boy who'd gotten his life handed to him on a platter and wouldn't have looked at Shane twice if he didn't need him to feed drug cravings.

A side door opened, and Shane cocked his head, unsure of what he was seeing. He'd expected a bulky frat boy dressed as a Spartan if he was hot, Joker if he considered himself edgy, or with glowing red horns if he was lazy. Tall, lean, with long dark hair reaching way below his shoulders in wavy cascades, the newcomer was... something else. His naked chest, framed by the folds of a cloak worthy of an elf from *Lord of The Rings*, shimmered with green and gold. Tight jeans clung to long legs, and he had a lightness to his step despite wearing heavy leather boots with cuffs. And as he approached Shane, the lights of the frat house created a halo around his fluffy locks.

But it was his face that drew Shane's attention right after he got his fill of staring at the taut stomach glimmering in the lamplight. An elaborate mask covered everything above the guy's nose, teasing Shane with eyes glinting from small openings. It had a short set of horns, cute floppy ears reminiscent of a doe's, and covering most of it was a mix of what seemed like moss, tree bark, and feathers, all in dark green, brown, and specks of gold.

Shane was no expert in these things, but that mask wasn't a gift shop throwaway.

The man extended a graceful hand from under the cloak, and the golden claws at the tips of ring-adorned fingers gave Shane pause. But this was no fairy tale creature. Just a man.

“Are you *the guy*? I’m Rosen,” he said, pulling Shane out of his stupor.

Rosen Beck was nothing like his conservative, suit-wearing father.

He was like nothing Shane had expected to cross paths with, period. Yet here they were—in a glimmering bubble in front of the frat house. But this wasn’t Shane’s first rodeo, and a smirk crawled onto his face as he leaned forward, taking his weight off the bike.

“First, the password.”

Rosen’s pretty lips twisted in annoyance, but then their eyes met, and he hesitated. “Treat or *treat*?” he asked, holding Shane’s gaze.

Something shimmered under Rosen’s Adam’s apple. A golden chain wrapped around his neck like a choker and connected to another, which ran down the lithe chest until it met a final one at his waist. Green jewels sparkled between his pecs, and the guy somehow pulled it off without appearing feminine. Was it the veins on his hands, or the ridges of muscles on his stomach enhanced by green body glitter? Rosen looked ridiculous, and Shane should’ve hated him for the sole reason of who his father was, yet the bright blue eyes watching him from behind the fancy mask wouldn’t stop being agitating on a completely different level.

“Does the treat involve your lips?” Shane asked, trying to breathe like a normal person while this creature from another world stood close enough to bite into. He’d had sex in prison, yes, but it had all been very utilitarian. Shane hadn’t wanted anyone getting attached to him or catching even the faintest suspicion that he was anything but a red-blooded heterosexual man who simply took his pleasures wherever he could get them.

He’d only hooked up once since coming out of the big house, so how was he to resist the temptation posed by this delicious elf? Rosen might be straight, *and* Ed Beck’s son, but what was the harm in a bit of flirting?

Rosen tensed, and when he licked his lip with the tip of his tongue, Shane couldn't suppress the spark of arousal in his balls. An unspoken invitation hung in the air and Rosen rested his clawed hand on the bike's handle, which very clearly stood in for Shane's dick.

Maybe he wasn't straight after all?

"Didn't your mother teach you not to toy with fairies?"

Shane's mother was gone. So was his father. Not that either of them had ever been of any use to him. Neither of them had ever mentioned fairies, but as silly as the concept of meeting supernatural creatures was, anything coming from that tempting mouth sounded fascinating.

"I'm the kind of guy who ran with scissors as a kid and sells drugs as an adult. I'm not scared of your claws," Shane whispered, nodding at the rings Rosen wore on the tips of his fingers. What would they feel like against his skin?

He wanted to know, regardless of who this kid was.

"Maybe you should be. When a fairy prince sinks his claws into a human, they scratch all the way to the bone." Rosen's eyes glinted in the faint light of the street lamp, and Shane could have sworn the guy inched closer. The scents of flowers and pine extended their invisible tendrils toward Shane and grabbed at his jacket, trying to entice him between the legs of this strange creature.

He was ready.

Even if those sharp claws were to leave permanent scars on his back and chest, he wanted to see what hid beneath the cape and pants, and lick the glittery paint off the trust fund boy's perfect skin. Didn't he deserve some sweetness after ten years in the can?

"Dear fairy prince, this human's afraid of nothing. Definitely not of you," Shane whispered and leaned in, inhaling the fresh aroma Rosen

carried on him.

They didn't have boys like that in prison.

Rosen bit his lip, but then his phone beeped, and he flinched, grabbing it as if it were his lifeline. "Sadly, I am being summoned back to the fairy realm, so our haggling ends here." He ran the tip of his claw over Shane's thigh, but then showed his palm, waiting for the drugs.

Shane tickled his wrist, going breathless when the light hit Rosen's eyes just right, revealing how very blue they were. What a beautiful, pampered animal this guy was. "Treat first."

Rosen's Adam's apple bobbed under the delicate golden chain, but he leaned forward and gave Shane a quick kiss on the lips with the skittishness of a doe. The brief touch of lips sent a fireball to Shane's nuts.

He grunted, crooking his head with a smile. "Will you invite me in?" he asked without thinking as the party music became a dull blur, muted by the thudding of Shane's heart.

A guy like this was what he'd missed out on, rotting his twenties away in prison. Shane was attractive and could have fucked his way through every pretty thing around the state instead of feeding on the scraps thrown away by society.

And tonight he wanted Rosen under him.

"I can't. Sorry," Rosen whispered and stepped back with his hand still extended for the drugs. "I need to get back, or I'll get in trouble."

Little did he know, *trouble* was right in front of him.

"I don't bite," Shane said but discreetly handed over the pills, making sure to touch the hot skin of Rosen's palm. The poor young buck shivered, biting his lip to keep in a whimper. "Unless you want me to."

Rosen hid the drugs somewhere in the shadows of his cloak, but his naked chest rose and fell ever faster. Even his nipples stiffened, beckoning

Shane in for bites. “I’m sure we’ll meet in dreams tonight,” he whispered and when he twirled away, his cloak *swooshed* in front of Shane, spreading more of that intoxicating scent in the air.

Despite the flirting, the way Rosen darted away suggested this was flight rather than an invitation. But was he running from Shane, or his own desire?

Shane would soon find out, because he’d already decided against calling the cops on Rosen and his frat boy friends.

Oh no, Shane had a whole new idea on how to *ruin* Rosen Beck, and he’d have fun doing it.

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Chapter 2 – Ros

Ros's heart rattled, and he was glad the mask hid his burning face. Dealing drugs was such a minor misdeed in comparison to what he'd just done.

He'd kissed a man.

He'd completely lost his mind and kissed a man. Out in the open, where anyone could have seen them. And since when were drug dealers that hot anyway?

The guy was tall, with broad shoulders and the smile of a rogue about to snatch away someone's bride. He didn't care what others thought, and despite it being Halloween, he wore a simple denim jacket with a fur collar, and distressed motorcycle boots. His hair was very short, which wasn't Ros's usual preference, but it somehow worked with that devilishly handsome face.

No wonder his presence scrambled Ros's brain.

Music hit his ears once he walked back inside, but it remained only a buzz, as if talking to the man outside had sent him so high into the air, at such a rapid speed that his ears were blocked.

The hall and the double stairs at its back were crawling with people, but with the red lightbulbs casting a dusky glow instead of the usual bright

light, he couldn't see anyone's faces as he stormed through the interior, stepping over broken glass and toward the stairs that promised the solitude of his room.

He sped up when a human-shaped tower of baby pink floated toward him, but once a glittery cape with a rainbow pattern blocked his way, he capitulated and looked up, increasingly agitated. Pete's pupils were already massive behind the pink Batman mask, which for some reason also had blush applied, though the lipstick he'd been wearing before had been already wiped away by some helpful mouth.

"Do you have my treats?" he demanded with a wide smile and presented his chest, which featured two nipples asymmetrically glued onto the foam armor. Pete had been very vocal about being *gay* Batman for Halloween, and he'd fulfilled his promise, though rather than being super edgy, he came off as super annoying.

"Talk to Brad, as alw—"

A massive chest marked by the Superman logo slid in front of Ros so fast it felt like confrontation. All was lost. He'd kissed a man in public, people had seen him, and there was no way the news wouldn't reach his dad's ears. But when Superman showed him his palm, Rosen was so baffled by the neutrality of the gesture that he shook it.

"What are you doing?" Superman yelled to be heard over the loud rap music. In the frat president, Brad's, voice.

"Wait. What?" Ros was confused by the other guy's behavior, yet his mind still lingered on the way the stranger's hot fingers had tickled his wrist.

Brad rubbed his chin, wiping away the eyeshadow used to create the illusion of a cleft on his chin. "The *treats*, man. Hand them over."

“Ah, yes.” Ros cleared his throat, but before he could have passed Brad the pumpkin-print bag he’d packed the pills into, Pete grabbed his face and made a duck face, leaning frighteningly close.

“Come on. A little freebie for old times’ sake, my Batwoman?”

“Christ, Pete. You’re getting far too much into that persona,” Brad scowled and pressed something into Gay Batman’s hand. The moment the pills were in Pete’s possession, he lost all interest in Ros, spinning away to follow a chick in a witch costume. But Rosen couldn’t exhale with relief yet.

Brad relaxed and leaned against the railing of the stairs. “Pulling a lot of girls in that?” he asked, eying Ros from top to bottom. It didn’t sound *mean* or suspicious, just inquisitive.

Ros was pretty sure there was an ongoing bet over whether he was gay or not, but he’d managed to keep his frat brothers confused by being the arty guy. And women did in fact drift to him often, so his sort-of-friends were happy enough that he drew them in.

“I guess. I invited the group of exchange students from Norway and they look pretty happy.” He discreetly pointed to the tall, blonde girls dressed as sexy Valkyries and drinking from horns.

Brad smiled like a bear who’d just gotten his fill of honey. “Oh yes, think I can take two of them to bed if I play my cards right?” he asked with a wiggle of his eyebrows. He remained unaware of the Elven prince’s transgression, but that didn’t change the fact that Ros felt as if the whole room was staring at him, already gossiping about him kissing a random older dude.

“Probably. One of them said my accent was hot, so you should try your luck.”

“Hell yes, bro!” Brad patted Ros’s shoulder, his sights already set on the group of exchange students.

It was a relief to not have to continue this conversation. Ros didn’t fit in with the bros, and it was painfully obvious to everyone, even though Brad occasionally made the effort to include him. The only reason he slid through was that he knew how to make himself useful by pulling in girls and assisting with the procurement of drugs.

Ros would have felt way more at ease in the regular dorm, but joining the frat had been his father’s condition if Ros wanted his art degree paid for, so here he was.

Brad patted his shoulder and moved toward the Valkyries, tugging on Ros hard enough to make him face the entrance.

The guy from before, the one whose lips tasted of the forbidden fruit, and whose piercing green eyes promised pleasures Ros couldn’t allow himself, stood under the Halloween banner and watched him with the same self-satisfied smile he’d sported earlier.

How was a shady guy like that even allowed to be so handsome? His face had such beautiful symmetry Ros would gladly use him as a model, and yet a couple of imperfections made him touchably real. His nose was a bit crooked to the side, and a scar slashed through the dark scruff on his pale skin, pointing toward his lips.

But when their eyes met, Ros averted his, because his father’s other condition for helping Ros through college was for him to stay the fuck in the closet. Father had cut the topic short when Ros had attempted to come out to him and had made it clear that “*Edward Beck, cannot have a gay son.*” Not if he wanted to be seen as someone who upheld traditional values.

So far, Ros had managed to keep his lust on a leash, which was quite a feat, taking into account that he was in his second year already.

But when the handsome stranger moved through the crowd of students in costumes, who parted in front of him like the Red Sea in front of Moses, the collar Ros had put on himself in order to survive until graduation started feeling uncomfortably tight.

Ros had long committed to living in a bubble that involved art, movies, books, and hanging out with the few friends he did have. He didn't need this clash with reality.

He turned and rushed up the stairs. He couldn't be flirted with, if he disappeared from the party. Simple. And why was he even thinking about flirting with a guy like *that* anyway? He was twenty-one, and the shallow crowd's feet on the dealer's face made him look thirty at least. But logic couldn't stop the shiver running up Ros's spine at that thought of being touched by him again.

He bumped into a girl dressed as Batwoman, and she hollered with rage when some of her drink spilled over her manicured fingers, but there was no time for long apologies, because the dealer had placed his foot on the bottom step, following Ros like a predator who knew his prey was already bleeding.

The fake confidence he'd tried to exude when presenting as the fairy prince was evaporating out of Ros like dark magic at the first hint of daylight. He'd put many hours of work into his elaborate mask, because Halloween was his day to let loose, but now he worried that he might have forgotten that he wasn't really a creature from another world who freely offered teasing kisses and disappeared in a *swoosh* of shimmer.

He sped up the stairs, hoping it would be enough of an indicator that he wasn't interested. (Even though he so was.)

He walked straight into a couple engaged in a *very heavy* make out session but didn't bother to check who they were and stormed straight down the corridor, toward his sanctuary.

Jumping over a chessboard left in the middle of the corridor for some fucked up reason, he stumbled forward, looking over the shoulder. His stomach tightened when he spotted the familiar figure stalking him—still at a distance yet confident in the success of this hunt.

Ros hit his door with the shoulder and fumbled with the handle, glad that he hadn't locked it earlier. Now all he needed to do was slide inside.

There. Safe and sound.

He must have completely ignored the music earlier, but now that he stood in his dark room, facing the door while his heart still fluttered like the wings of a hummingbird, he could sense the beat drumming against his feet.

He breathed in the scent of the candle he'd burned earlier, increasingly confident the hot stranger had given up on the chase, but then someone knocked on the door. Three times.

Fuck.

The irony of the situation was that he lived in a single-occupation bedroom because his father feared a male roommate might become a temptation. Too bad for him, there were other men Ros could invite to his sanctuary, and now everything he desired was within reach. Just beyond the door that he could lock and open at will.

"Who is it?" he asked as if he didn't know already.

"A lowly human," came from the other side in the same raspy, seductive voice the man had spoken with earlier. "Begging for an audience."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

And yet Ros's tongue had a mind of his own, and just like the mask he wore, his words had a way of hiding his inhibitions. "I warn you once more. Stepping into this realm is not for the feeble."

"I'm not 'feeble', whatever that means," came from the other side, and the confident way with which this man confessed to being ignorant about some of Ros's vocabulary was like an injection of heat straight into his veins.

Ros swallowed and hovered his fingers over the latch. This was insane. His hair bristled and his skin rose in goosebumps when he glanced at the clock. It was eleven.

"You will have until midnight," he warned, but already opened the lock, fighting the need to shudder when thick fingers slid in and held the door, as if the stranger worried Ros might change his mind.

He stepped back, breathlessly watching the red light slide in, along with the shadow of the handsome stranger who entered without asking for any further permission. He was taller than Ros, with thicker arms and a face that had been punched many a time. Maybe that was how he'd become so fearless?

The lock clicked.

Ros just stared at him, unable to breathe, like a rabbit trapped in a cage with a wolf. Only this rabbit had a death wish and wanted to end up in the predator's jaws.

"H-hey," he uttered like the biggest idiot when he was supposed to be the fairy prince. A fancy cloak couldn't shield him from his own nerves.

The man smirked, and in the faint light coming through the window, his eyes glinted like a wolf's. "So how does it work? Do I kneel first?"

Could someone faint from holding their breath, or would instincts kick in and force them to inhale? In any case, role-playing should lead Ros

down an easier path through this unexpected flirt situation.

He cleared his throat. “Depends on what wish you want granted.” There. He could also be bold and flirty.

“I want your tight pants to open for me,” the man whispered and gravitated closer, pushing Ros at a nearby wall with his sheer presence. The beat of the music couldn’t compete with the furious pulsing in his veins when the tall figure sank low in front of him.

It felt as if he wasn’t wearing the mask anymore. He’d intended to put his hands on the stranger’s shoulders to create distance, but touching him only got Ros more excited, as if he were already licking the forbidden fruit. He could just imagine digging his metal claws into flesh and drawing sweet ambrosia. “I don’t— I mean, I never...”

“No?” the stranger whispered, resting his palms on Ros’s thighs. Their heat reached him through his jeans and made his muscles melt. “Such a handsome young man and no one approached you yet?”

“I can’t exactly—My dad, it’s complicated.” Wow. He really was bad at this. “And you... you’re gay?” *No, you idiot, the man about to slide his hands to your ass is doing it because he believes you’re a fairy prince.*

The stranger hummed, pressing close so suddenly Ros hit the back of his head against the wall behind him. Any words of protest died on his lips when he sensed his visitor’s fresh yet earthy cologne.

Time stood still.

“Let’s make it less complicated,” said the handsome man and pressed his mouth to Ros’s, triggering a jolt of pleasure that prompted him to squeeze his thighs together.

Could this be his Halloween treat? No one needed to know. At this point, saying no would have been like trying to stop a speeding train. His

lips parted, and it was Ros who was being transported to another world, one in which this illicit moment was something to be enjoyed.

When the stranger whose name he didn't even know pressed against him, tongue sliding into Ros's mouth, knee between Ros's thighs, he let out a little whimper and clutched his hands on the wide shoulders, now wishing he didn't have the claws so he could touch more freely.

"I'm gonna give you the ride of your life," the green-eyed man whispered into his ear while holding on to Ros's neck. The threat of choking should have scared Ros, but when the pressure on his balls increased, all he could think of was '*more*'.

He moaned, hot as a furnace. He had no idea where this path would lead him, but just for tonight, he'd throw caution to the wind and follow his instinct. His fingers trembled, but he still slid them down the man's—

"What's your name?" he uttered.

"Shane. Ready to moan *that*?" asked the hot guy in a heated whisper. He didn't let Ros think and pushed his face under his jaw, gently nipping the skin there.

Ros had felt confident in his half naked form before but was now painfully aware of how *available* his body was in the skimpy outfit. "The shimmer, it's non-toxic," he said, unsure how to proceed when his palms brushed over Shane's nipples.

Shane stalled before moving his nose up Ros's jaw, all the way back to his quivering lips. "I'd lick toxic shimmer for a guy like you."

Ros chuckled nervously and dared lick Shane's lip as he embraced the sturdy chest. He wasn't tiny himself, but Shane's bone structure was broader and covered with more meat. "Wait, I'll just..." He pointed to the mask that was trapping heat against his skin. Ros stalled. "Unless you want it on?"

“Oh no, show me your face, fairy prince.”

With a grin, Shane pulled him out of the corner and closer to the window. Ros’s room was on the short side of the building and therefore didn’t get as much outside illumination or noise during big parties like the one tonight, but there should be enough of it to keep the lamps off. Ros had a distinct feeling that switching any of them on might ruin the fantasy, and for this one night he wanted to *live* it.

Ros hesitated but gave Shane one quick peck on the lips, shivering when he realized that Shane’s scent would have made a dead man hard. He pulled off the claws one by one, then fumbled with the elaborate mix of ties and bobby pins at the back of his head and, with his heart in his throat, he lifted the mask. He was pretty sure Shane would like what he saw, even if Ros was flushed and a bit sweaty underneath.

He had a big nose that he believed looked striking—a statuesque shape softened by large eyes and long lashes. His face was oval, but high cheekbones gave it definition. He imagined most people didn’t dedicate as much thought to their own features, but he’d practiced sculpting using his own image enough times to be very aware even of the unusually straight line of his eyebrows.

Shane exhaled, and for a few dreadful seconds he just stared at Ros in silence, but then his face brightened in a wide smile and he pushed his fingers into Ros’s long hair. “I’ll be damned. Caught myself a real pretty one.”

Ros let out a nervous laugh. Women never gave him those kinds of compliments, but even if they did, they wouldn’t have sent shivers down his spine. This man’s opinion mattered to Ros on a whole new level. He wasn’t sure how to respond, but he didn’t have to, because Shane shoved him onto

the single bed covered with an embarrassingly large number of cushions. But what was Ros to do if he enjoyed leaning against them as he read?

The landing knocked the air out of him, and he remained breathless as Shane stood over him with that delicious smirk and removed his boots, which fell to the floor with a dull thud.

“And your name? It’s Rosen, right?”

“Call me Ros.” He fumbled to remove the cloak and his own boots, which wasn’t an easy feat when all he wanted to do was watch Shane. Ros would have stared at a man so handsome anyway, but him being available for kisses elevated him to the status of a demigod.

An embarrassing noise left his lips when Shane took off his denim jacket, revealing that he wore a white tank top underneath, and the thin garment showed off thick arms covered by black and white tattoos. Hammers, guns, and other kinds of weapons levitated in smoke, and while the inkwork wasn’t new, it not only accentuated Shane’s lean muscles but could also serve as a threat.

“Ros,” Shane repeated and removed the next garment to reveal his chest. With only a bit of hair peppered in the middle and on his stomach, he was lean, with pronounced muscles bulging under the skin as he opened his belt with a loud click.

Ros couldn’t even blink as his mouth watered. He’d never imagined things could develop so fast between two strangers. He’d barely learned Shane’s name, and yet he had no intention to stop despite not yet feeling ready to take his own jeans off. He might be confident about his face, but he’d never been intimate with a guy, and the prospect of letting Shane touch him felt overwhelming.

“You’re... so handsome,” he whispered, in awe of the veins on Shane’s big hands, and already knowing he’d be drawing them tomorrow.

Shane tugged on his belt, and the rasp of leather pulling through denim loops made Ros curl his toes. With gaze fixed on his willing victim, Shane stepped between Ros's spread legs and leaned over him, placing his hands on either side of his head. "I'm gonna fuck you tonight."

Ros's heart stopped, then resumed at the pace of a comet cutting through the sky. The statement was so blunt. To the point. And despite being so stunned, Ros was confident he wouldn't say no. His face was hot as if he were dipping it in hell. If his dad never found out though...

He placed his hands over Shane's and gave a little nod, unable to speak.

Logic told him this wouldn't be some transcendent experience, but he *was* under this man's spell now, even if he'd mean nothing to him tomorrow.

Shane kissed him, tickling the seam of Ros's hungry lips with the tip of his tongue. "Good boy. Where's your lube?"

Ros had to take a second to compose himself. This was really happening. While he was too scared to own a dildo, since it might end up being found, he had sometimes toyed with himself using fingers. But actual sex? With another man? Now that it was a possibility, his mind didn't just turn liquid. It evaporated altogether, leaving behind mush.

"Am I that obvious?" he uttered, hiding half his face in his hand and pointing to the drawer in his nightstand with the other.

Shane hummed and stretched over Ros's flushed face. He only did it to reach the item he wanted, but Ros liked to imagine that this cool, dangerous guy wanted him to have a good look at his body.

"Hm, you learn to see the way men look at you. That's when it becomes obvious," Shane said and lowered his ass to Ros's hips, suddenly rolling it to the beat coming from downstairs.

He reminded Ros of a jaguar playing with his prey, and it was impossible not to glance down at the bulge in his open pants. “I’ve never—fuck. I’ve already said, haven’t I?” At least the darkness helped keep nerves at bay. Tinted by the red lights from outside, the ambience in the room was pure desire. And when Shane descended on him, shifting to cover Ros with his whole body, the ceiling above spun like an erotic merry-go-round.

“You smell so damn good,” Shane whispered as his teeth pinched Ros’s ear, making him push his hips up in desperate need. Fire licked his feet, the backs of his thighs, his balls, and the hard, fragrant body on top of him was the only solace, so he rocked against it, already breathless.

He wrapped his arms over Shane’s neck, hugging him. He would usually satisfy his desires in a world of secret fantasies, but the touchable nature of his current reality was better than any sensuous dream he’d ever had. Shane’s muscles danced under his touch, and Ros rubbed himself against the stubble on his to-be-lover’s cheek in a primal need to leave his scent on his mate.

He wasn’t ready, but he was gonna do it anyway.

“You smell like the ocean, and I want to dive in.” So maybe he was being sappy when for this guy this was surely yet another hook-up, but his heart was far too tender to be cut out of the equation.

Shane stalled, and his silence froze something deep inside Ros. Had he overdone it? Would Shane now pick himself up, give him a talk about not wanting to complicate their lives, and leave as fast as he’d burst into Ros’s world? A few seconds passed, but instead of rolling away, Shane descended on Ros with a wild flash in his eyes, planting biting kisses all over Ros’s neck and shoulders.

His hot breath danced over damp skin, triggering shivers that traveled up and down Ros’s body beyond his control. He felt the touch

under his skin, and it left him unable to speak. His flesh took over, and he rocked against Shane without shame, for the first time ever sharing his arousal with another person. His confidence grew with each kiss and bite, until he wanted nothing more than to let Shane feel his erection and see him as a sexual being.

The hair on top of Shane's head was longer, but the neatly trimmed sides were soft fuzz to the touch, and Ros curled around this unexpected Halloween treat, wrapping his legs around Shane's hips.

Shane hummed, rubbing his scruffy face against Rosen's chest. The bristles teased a sensitive nipple, making his whole body arch as he struggled for breath. But just when he relaxed and once again fell onto the mattress, Shane grabbed his hand and led it between their bodies. To his cock.

"Oh my God..." Ros whispered and squeezed the hard dick with the eagerness of a pup getting his first lick of sugar. He wanted to touch it, stroke it, free it from its confines, see it in all its undoubtable glory and then trace every ridge and vein with his tongue. As soon as he understood it was allowed, he slid his hand into Shane's underwear and wrapped his fingers around the thick, hot tool.

Shane's eyes shut, and he rested his burning forehead against Ros's while the music made the walls around them pulse. "You've got a strong hand," he whispered, shifting his hips to thrust into the grip.

"I'm a sculptor. I need to remember your shape," Ros murmured and kissed Shane's shoulder, feeling less inadequate with every second passing between them. What was the worst that could happen? They both clearly wanted to share this, and there was no reason to think about anything beyond their little bubble.

Shane laughed and pushed himself lower, trapping Ros's hands between their hips. The light outside was changing color, and the mixture of red, orange, and violet passed over his handsome face and shoulder in a moment of absolute satisfaction.

This was what Ros wanted. A man who desired him and the freedom to explore him. How could he ever go back to celibacy after this?

"Yeah? You gonna sculpt my dick in the morning?"

"I just might." Ros smiled and leaned up to nip Shane's lip. He'd kissed a few girls in the past, but those experiences were only shadows now that he knew how a man's mouth could feel on his.

And they tasted even sweeter when smooth, hard flesh fucked Ros's fist at the same time. He shivered when Shane pulled his hips back enough for the cockhead to drag over Ros's palm, leaving a slick trail on his skin.

"Undress. Those legs and ass look so damn fine," Shane rasped and slapped the side of Ros's thigh as he rolled off, taking his dick out of Ros's damp grasp.

Ros hardly registered the compliment, too interested in the cock taken from him. Now that he could see it, he wanted to overcome the need to blink. The head was big, glistening from the juices he'd smeared over it, and the girth that fit perfectly in his hand now seemed so enormous he was both salivating and scared.

"Just a sec." He rose to his knees and reached out to Shane's hip. Every time the lights outside blinked their way, showing Shane's body, Ros's heart skipped a beat. The other man was so well-built, and Ros wished he had the time to ask about every scar and tattoo.

Maybe he would. If Shane fell asleep and stayed until morning.
If he gave Ros his number.

He tried to get the tight jeans off, but when his gaze met Shane's, the wildcat of a man grabbed the hem and dragged it down Ros's hips with an impatient grunt. Knocked over, Ros gasped, watching Shane peel the fabric off him as if he were a predator stripping skin from his prey.

Sweat shone on the furrowed brow, teeth dug into his bottom lip, his powerful chest worked up and down as if Shane couldn't think of anything but consuming Ros's body.

No matter how excited he was, being stripped naked, vulnerable under a man who was probably quite dangerous, made Ros shiver, but he clung to Shane nevertheless. If this was to be his only moment of madness during college, then he'd take it, since there was no point in backing out at this point.

He could have come just from rubbing his own hard cock against Shane's. Every move seemed quicker, as if Ros was being drawn into a whirlwind from which there would be no escape.

But then cool air hit his skin, and he realized he was naked in front of a perfect stranger who would take his virginity. Hesitation glimmered at the back of his mind, begging for attention, but then Shane kicked off his remaining clothes, and they clashed in the middle of the bed. Hands roamed all over Ros's skin, squeezing bits of flesh on his back, slapping his thighs, and—oh, grabbing his ass, and he rocked against the fragrant, muscular body, letting his own fingers explore.

Things were going too fast, but there was no way he'd take this last chance to hop off the rollercoaster of Shane's charm. He loved the confidence with which this man had crashed into his life, and the way his sturdy body was built, so unlike the pampered gym muscles of his frat brothers. Shane's skin had a story Ros craved to unravel, and he was ready to take his time peeling away at its layers.

Ros let his hands roam and closed his eyes when his fingers found irregular scar tissue on Shane's lower back. Every bit of him was a question Ros didn't have the time to ask.

"You're so damn hot," Shane whispered, staring at him as if he couldn't believe his eyes. The raw hunger in his gaze was like nothing Ros had seen before, and despite his fears, he couldn't deny this guy the meal he was craving. Before Ros could have come up with a fun, flirty way to answer, Shane shoved him back, and grabbed one of the cushions, stuffing it under Ros's ass.

Oh.

"H-how do we...?" he asked, suddenly adrift when Shane sat back on his heels between Ros's spread thighs. He'd never felt this exposed to anyone, and was both eaten up by nerves and horny as all fuck.

He gasped when Shane pinched his thigh with a wide grin, placing his hands on Ros's knees and pulling them apart as if he believed he had every right to.

Which he did.

"I want to see your face when I push into you."

How could one man be this scorching hot? Ros was already melting at the cocky little quirk of eyebrow Shane gave him. He wasn't sure whether he should focus on the hard dick, the solid abs, or the hardened nipples right in front of him. How could Ros have believed that he'd last without sex until after college was over?

In this moment, Shane's desire for him seemed like the most important thing in the world, and when he spread Ros's legs wide with that satisfied smile, Ros wanted to be the greatest lover this guy had ever had. The *click* of the lube bottle made all those hot fantasies come to a halt. Reality was knocking at the doors of his overheated skull, and the truth was

that he had no idea if this encounter wouldn't end up being terribly painful, or embarrassing, and... shouldn't he like... *prepare* for this?

"Do you want me to... um?" Ros whispered and glanced at the door. It wasn't as though he had an en-suite here. He'd have to go out.

And how was he to even ponder this when that bulging cock twitched, as if revving to go.

Shane dropped the lube and pushed his fingers between Ros's buttocks so abruptly, it was impossible not to stiffen at the cool touch. Oh, his hand was so slick and wet. "Do what, pretty boy?" he rasped, leaning forward to shut Ros's mouth with a kiss.

"Go wash?" he whispered, so embarrassed he was on the verge of closing his eyes despite Shane's lips being there to soothe him.

Shane snorted, and his fingertip licked Ros's hole, prompting him to rise with a raspy inhale. *Oh, God.* Being touched like this was so good.

As if he were a man at last, not a sexless, statuesque boy all the girls wanted as their artistic friend.

"Just relax and enjoy it."

Ros dared a smile and ran his hand up Shane's forearm, struck by how rarely he got to touch another man at all. The desire reflected in Shane's eyes was the mirror he'd needed to see himself for the lusty being he was.

He nodded and rocked his ass a little against Shane's fingers. They were rubbing him now, rolling against sensitive skin in a circular motion that very quickly started to test Ros's patience. Something strange was happening to his body. His arousal would usually focus on his cock and balls, but now it seemed that his hips went up in flames, and all he could think of was the heat in the little hole Shane kept rolling his finger over.

He raised his ass off the bed, but before he could have asked for *more* touch, The digit pushed halfway in, letting Ros adjust to the odd sensation. He'd expected his muscles to yield, but despite his desire, his ass wouldn't cooperate and tightened around the finger.

"Go on," Ros whispered, ready whatever the sensation would be. He was ready for the thunder and wouldn't be taking cover. His dick was almost painfully hard and dribbling pre-cum over his shimmery stomach. He didn't care that they didn't know each other, because right now, it felt as though they did.

"You're one eager puppy, aren't you?" Shane rasped and grabbed one of Ros's knees, pulling it to rest on his hip. It was such a hot power move that the knots in Ros's stomach relaxed, and the digit went in. All the way to the knuckle.

"Twenty-one years of pent-up horniness, okay?" Ros bit his lip, staring into Shane's lust-filled eyes. He wanted to belong with this man even if just for one night.

"You're so fucking hot on the inside," Shane whispered, twisting the finger. It was an odd sensation, as if the muscle he was trying to stretch outright refused to relax and instead stung like a pinch, but when Shane dove forward and bit the side of Ros's neck, a sudden charge unwound all the stiffness inside him.

Oh God, another finger slid in.

He moaned and grabbed Shane's shoulders. He was unable to stay still, and while he'd end up with hickeys, he couldn't find it in himself to care. He lifted his other leg too, eager to be closer.

The two digits meant business, and while it didn't hurt, he could sense Shane was anxious to enter him. And so was he, despite all his fears and worries. Tonight, he'd get fucked for the first time. For once, he'd feel

it rather than imagine the sensation, and his insides were already tickling in anticipation.

Would this be it? Would he become addicted to it and unable to stop?

He whimpered, shaking when Shane's knuckles repeatedly hit his flesh, but when they crooked and massaged the tender flesh within with unexpected gentleness, Ros's senses flared up. Was it painful? Pleasurable? Weird?

He didn't know, but he'd fuck Shane up if he stopped.

"That's it. Feel it. My cock's gonna hit this spot over and over," Shane promised in a low voice that made him sound like a bear preparing for a feast.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck! Right there," he moaned without a single thought in his head that didn't include Shane fucking him. His toes curled and the pleasure seemed to go straight to his dick. Shane knew exactly what he was doing, and there was no more room for fancy words. All Ros wanted was to get off with that thick cock spurting cum inside him.

Their desires must have been aligned, because Shane offered him a satisfied smirk and pulled his fingers out, leaving Ros itching for their touch. He grabbed his jeans, took out a condom and rubbered up with the proficiency of a... well, someone who fucked around a lot.

"You ready for this dick, boy?" he whispered, stretching with pleasure as he applied more lube to his tool.

Ros likely wasn't, but he still nodded, *dying* to feel that sensation inside again. He locked eyes with Shane when he pressed the head of his cock to Ros's stretched and slippery hole.

"I want it," he rasped, intoxicated by the lust coursing in his veins.

Shane was magnificent above him. Muscular, and strong, and decisive, he was Ros's personal god of sex, and when he grabbed Ros's legs

and placed them on his shoulders, it exposed the hole to whatever he wanted to do with it.

His dick pressed against it, and pushed, but just as unexpected discomfort made Ros stiffen, Shane stalled and turned his head to bite Ros's knee. His shaft was still knocking at the tight entrance, but he wasn't attempting to push his way in and grabbed Ros's dick with his free hand.

"Oh fuck! I'm gonna come." Ros panicked when instant arousal overwhelmed his senses.

But Shane squeezed the base of his dick without mercy. "No, you're not."

Ros gasped for a relieved breath, and in that moment Shane bucked with his hips, pushing right into Ros's relaxed body. A tight fit. Slightly uncomfortable. But so fucking hot Ros was about to lose his goddamn mind.

He couldn't believe it. He had a cock inside him, and the man it belonged to watched him as if he'd never seen anyone as hot, and it was still going in, hard and throbbing, and almost too big for Ros to handle. Yet when it bottomed out and Shane's pubes tickled his ass, the sensation of fullness was so overwhelming he wanted to cry.

"Oh fuck," Shane muttered, breathing fast with his eyes shut, as if he needed a moment to sober up.

Ros would've seconded that if he hadn't been breathless, feeling like the sexiest pretzel with his legs framing Shane's head. He rubbed his thumb over his lover's bottom lip, floating in the rapids of their lovemaking. So he was a sap. Shane didn't need to know *everything* Ros thought about when they banged.

But Shane's face turned toward Ros's palm, and he licked it, opening his eyes to look at him in the duskiess of the room illuminated by the holo

lights outside. His hips rocked with the gentlest motion, not really moving yet, just shifting position as he stared straight into Ros's eyes. "So fucking hard for you."

Once more, Ros was afraid he'd come on the spot, but he still had some stamina left. "Show me," he whispered and wrapped his arm over Shane's neck to pull him down for another one of those breathless kisses.

The world came to a standstill when Shane exhaled hot air straight into his waiting mouth, only to roll forward at breakneck speed when a hot tongue stabbed Ros's mouth, stroking his palate. Their bodies aligned, arching then dropping, and the thick cock nudged Ros's prostate, making him twitch.

Shane let out a raspy laugh, staring at him like a wolf about to consume a lamb. "That's it."

Ros caught another kiss, pawing at Shane wherever he could reach. He'd never before felt this urgency not just for sex, but for another person. Their connection was completely different to his libido floating around in random bouts of horniness. The desire couldn't have been more focused this time, like an arrow tip sharpened over years of unresolved sexual tension, with Shane as its one target.

He whimpered when Shane rose and folded him in two, pressing on the backs of his thighs as he kneeled with his prick lodged deep in Ros's channel. His short hair shone in the faint light, and the strong muscles bulged with tension as he withdrew his hips, dragging the cock out at an agonizingly slow pace.

Ros could hardly believe it, but as he curled under Shane, legs on Shane's shoulders, arms wrapped around his neck, he felt both aroused and safe. So maybe Shane was a drug dealer Ros had known for less than an

hour, maybe he shouldn't have trusted him or let him in, but none of that mattered when their communication went so far beyond words.

He relaxed, allowing for the deep penetration that made him moan each time Shane thrust in. Thank fuck for the loud party, because Ros doubted he'd be able to keep his voice down.

Shane's thick fingers pushed into his hair and held on to his mane, keeping him in place while the cock left him almost empty. Only the tip remained inside Ros's hole, building anticipation until every hair on Ros bristled. He wanted to ask for more but didn't trust himself to speak to this magnificent *man*, who now hung above him with a predatory grin. Shane's body was tense, as if it could snap at any moment, but when that happened and his tool thrust deep into Ros, the world shimmered with brilliant colors.

"Take that, boy..."

"Oh fuck!" Ros whimpered and grabbed Shane's neck tighter as his thighs shivered with the pleasure radiating from their connection. He'd convinced himself he'd sail through college without sex, that he hadn't even met a guy he wanted anyway, yet here he was, spreading his legs and begging for more. "Come on, make me come," he pleaded, looking into Shane's eyes when he managed to keep his own open.

Shane's upper lip lifted, as if he were a wolf showing his teeth, but he didn't stall, and his mouth clashed with Ros's. He didn't have the vocabulary to describe the sensation of that stiff, hot, and warm length moving inside his body. And while it was an intrusion, his flesh relaxed, inviting the rhythmic stabs.

Every time that thick cock rubbed his prostate, a spark of pure bliss ignited in his balls, but instead of reaching for his cock, Ros stayed put,

craving to find out if he could come just from being fucked this way. On the edge of an orgasm to blow away all others.

He brushed his fingers over the short hair at the back of Shane's head, aroused even by the scent of their mixing sweat. It fused with the aromas of cologne, and fresh sheets, creating an intoxicating smell Ros would forever associate with sex.

Shane let out a growl that sent shivers down Ros's spine. It said he was about to be consumed by the apex predator, but the fear sparking at the bottom of his stomach made each touch somehow more intense, as if the beast's claws were already stripping him of all the layers he carried for protection.

When Shane dragged his nails over the back of Ros's thigh and pulled it up to change the angle of his thrusts, pleasure boiled over, making Ros thrash, and shiver, and make noises he hadn't thought himself capable of. His balls throbbed, and as the hard cock shoved against Ros's prostate over and over, cum shot up his chest in long, thick spurts.

The orgasm was so intense he cried out when it washed over him in several waves. He lost his breath, drowning in pleasure under the onslaught of Shane's thrusts. Gripping the guy's shoulders, he sensed tears under his eyelids and had to squeeze his eyes shut so they wouldn't embarrass him. His body came alive with shivers and goosebumps that were like ants crawling from Shane's skin onto his, as if they'd melted together in the heat of their sex.

The handsome face flashed above him, twitching as Shane closed his eyes, speeding up to slam into Ros's body. It should have hurt, but with him being so utterly relaxed, Ros focused on the powerful body above him, watching the muscles jerk as ecstasy passed over the masculine features.

Hotter than any porn he'd ever seen.

Shane's growl was so low Ros felt rather than heard it before the sweaty body dropped on top of him, knocking out what little air was in his lungs.

Ros hugged him, too breathless to speak yet wanting to communicate his exasperated emotions. He kissed Shane's jaw, his ear, his hair, stroked the sweaty back and let out little whimpers without a hint of shame. This wasn't how he'd envisioned his first time with a man, yet it already toppled all his fantasies.

"Shane..." Ros whispered his name with a smile.

The bright eyes opened and focused on him. Then a smile bloomed on Shane's face, and he rubbed his nose against Ros's before slowly withdrawing from him. Ros wished to keep him inside for longer but had no energy to hold him in place as Shane pulled out of his arms to kneel.

Heat crept into his face again when he spotted the filled condom that kept his lover's spunk from flooding his body.

Ros almost asked him if he was staying the night, but then remembered where they were and the bubble burst. He lifted himself to his elbows, deliciously sticky.

"I never came like that."

His lover's teeth glinted in the red glow from outside, and he leaned in, gently biting Ros's lip. "That's because you never experienced me. You should give me your number, pretty boy."

Ros's heart just about fluttered out of his chest. He shouldn't let this guy patronize him, but being called a *pretty boy* melted him as if he were a dollop of whipped butter dropped into a hot pan.

Shane wanted his number.

They'd be doing this again.

Somewhere. Somehow.

“Only if you give me yours,” he whispered into another kiss, intoxicated by this connection his father could never learn about.

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Chapter 3 – Shane

Shane had had plenty of sex in prison, but never like this.

Never with a boy this pretty.

Never in a bed.

Never without the pressure of what others might think. And while he had every intention of using Rosen to destroy his father's political career, why not enjoy himself while he was at it? His youth might have passed behind bars, but when he'd pinned down the slender, smooth body and looked at the handsome face surrounded by a halo of wavy hair, he felt like no time had passed and he was twenty again.

Even though he'd been speeding down empty roads for half an hour already, his flesh still buzzed with the aftermath of the needy kisses and the memory of his cock buried deep in that tight ass.

He already imagined Ros eventually telling his father how in love he was, and that he couldn't hold it in any longer. Ed Beck's horrified gaze would slide to Shane, and he'd instantly realize that the man he considered scum to piss on had been fucking his boy for weeks. Shane had no doubt that unwanted visions of Ros on his knees and begging for cock would pass through Beck's mind, searing themselves into his brain forever.

Shane might not have the resources to hurt the corrupt bastard in any other way, but his charm and cock might just do the trick.

He'd left Rosen with a big hickey to remember him by, and while the boy had been horrified when someone had knocked on his door soon after the two of them had finished fucking, he didn't push Shane away, and instead froze against him, as if in need of guidance.

Shane could give him that and more. He'd corrupt that sweet, innocent soul and mold him into someone Ed Beck couldn't afford to keep around. And once the conservative voters the bastard wanted to attract found out about the illicit family secret, it would be *Bye bye, political career!*

Dark satisfaction filled Shane's veins as he slowed upon approach to the junkyard owned by his good friend, Frank. Back in the day, the two of them had operated the business together—both the legal and illegal parts of the venture. But since leaving prison, Shane had been getting reacquainted with the world and had to catch up on how the place was run nowadays. Frank put no pressure on him and told him to enjoy freedom before considering any real work, but Shane would eventually want to pull his weight, so he took notice of how the piles of scrap had grown.

Ten years ago, Ed Beck had contacted them about a woman he'd ran over while driving under the influence at night. She needed to disappear, and the two of them could make it happen for a handsome sum of money. Shane had been drinking that night, and in a moment of absolute stupidity had decided to sit in Beck's fancy car while on the job.

The cops had come out of nowhere—just a random patrol—and before he knew what had hit him, Shane had been accused of being the driver who'd killed the poor woman. Beck confirmed that version of events. His career couldn't take such a fall, he'd later said, but while he'd hired a

decent lawyer for Shane, the sentence had still been ten years. Frank must have been beside himself, worried that his side business might become exposed in the process, but Shane had kept his mouth shut and had taken the fall for everyone.

When Shane had been barely twenty, Frank had caught him stealing at the junkyard, and instead of shooting him on the spot for trespassing, Frank had given him a chance to prove himself. The bastard was the size of a bear, but deep down in that chest made of steel, hid a soft heart. If not for the general population, then for lost gay boys in need of guidance. They'd not only kept in touch throughout the years, but Frank had also made sure Shane's commissary account was always well-stocked. By the time Shane had gotten out, they'd become real good friends.

Two other young men had moved in with Frank while Shane had been out of the picture, and while one of them was the man's nephew, the other—a perfect stranger—remained a nuisance to everyone. But who was Shane to criticize Frank for taking in strays when he used to be one himself?

He needed to get off the bike in order to open the gate, but once he left the road, diving into the sanctuary of scrap piles and disused vehicles, the threat that always loomed at the back of his mind whenever he was among people was replaced by a sense of calm.

During his time in the penitentiary, freedom had seemed like the solution to everything wrong with his boring, aimless life. He hadn't expected to only feel at ease behind fences once he'd finished doing time. It was something he hadn't admitted even to Frank, but without the junkyard and his tiny bedroom, he would have been adrift rather than 'free'.

In the dark, the slopes of plastic and metal were indistinguishable from natural dunes, and as Shane relaxed his shoulders, pushing his bike along the asphalt road winding through the massive site, he let his mind

empty until it reached a meditative state he couldn't ever allow himself back in the can.

"Name!" yelled someone far too close, and a sharp object poked at the back of his head, ruining the relaxed atmosphere.

There was the nuisance. The fucking sore on Shane's ass. The flea sucking Frank's life blood.

Shane exhaled, his muscles stiffening as he fought the fury buzzing deep inside him and the reflexes that told him to fight. "Are you fucking blind, Jag? Go back to the hole you've come from!"

The culprit slowly took away his weapon from Shane's head. "It's a den," he said in a raspy voice. Shane had no idea if that way of speaking was natural for the guy, or just something he did to seem more animalistic. He did have some scars on the throat, so who knew?

Shane should think about his bike, but once the sharp metal was away from his flesh, something at the back of his head snapped, and he spun around, punching the shadowed face. "A real dog would have recognized me! You're so fucking useless!"

He flinched when his vehicle hit the asphalt, but what were a few scratches in comparison to the satisfaction of hitting a man who kept offending him with his presence alone?

Jag flinched and grabbed his face, but instantly raised his spear—because of course he had a *spear*, made of a pipe—and pointed it at Shane's chest, creating distance. "I'm no dog! Only reason you're still breathing is that you're Frank's friend! What did you expect when you sneak around in the middle of the night, huh?"

Definitely not being accosted by this clown.

Jag would have been quite handsome if someone taught him to walk straight, eat with utensils, sleep in a bed, and replaced the weird fuckery he

called clothing with something that didn't scream 'low-budget post-apo movie', but they'd been clashing from the day they'd met, so Shane had discarded the notion of making a move on the freak.

In the dark, the long, fluffy hair created a strange halo around his head, and the armor of scrap metal transformed his shoulders into an inhuman shape. But he was still only a man who refused to see the world for what it was.

Shane hoped the crazy fuck wouldn't stab all of them in their sleep because a bird told him to.

"'Sneaking around'? What the fuck are you on about? I just decided to push my bike instead of driving it home. I've lived here longer than you!"

The faint glow coming from Frank's house beyond the pile of scrap metal offered just enough light for Shane to see Jag squinting at him. The golden-green eyes did remind Shane of a wild cat, but he'd sooner die than compliment the psycho.

"No you haven't. I've been here three winters."

"Well, I lived with Frank when you were still a little kid running around with the wolves, or whatever it was you used to do for fun in that little fucked-up commune of yours, so beat it," Shane growled and dragged up his poor bike. A part of him never stopped worrying Jag would sink his teeth into his neck and rip out a chunk of flesh, but the crazy guy respected Frank's authority too much to go against his wishes and attack an acquaintance.

Instead of answering, Jag growled at him in warning, but by the time Shane looked back from behind the bike, the beast of Wreck & Repair had dispersed into the shadows. He could see what Frank meant when he'd told Shane Jag was great at guarding the perimeter of the property and saw

things the camera system did not—especially in the spots that had been strategically placed away from digital surveillance. But if it were up to Shane, he'd treat him like the animal he was and put a shock collar on his neck.

And the worst fucking thing was that with Jag gone, Shane was uneasy about not knowing where the beast was. Logic told him the weirdo wasn't a threat, but no man was truly predictable, and crazies even less so.

Cursing under his breath, Shane climbed onto the bike and crossed the remaining distance at the highest speed he could achieve on the winding road. After all, Jag was proficient at shooting from a bow of his own making, and Shane had the sudden urge to deprive him of a possible moving target.

Frank's home, a bungalow covered with brown siding, was surrounded by all kinds of junk and a little white fence the man's ex had put up as a gag gift two years back. The end result was a surreal picture of normalcy with piles of garbage in place of rolling hills and stacks of damaged cars towering over the driveway like a parody of poplar trees.

Shane had no idea how late it was, but his body was still buzzing with energy after the most amazing sex he'd had in ages, and he grinned at the sight of a yellow glow peeking out from behind the living room curtain. He left his bike under a sheet metal roof attached to the house on one side and stormed straight in.

Frank looked up at him from the large table in the middle of the kitchen. He was a bear of a man, six-foot-five, with hands that could be called skull-crushers, and a stern expression on his wide face. It was always funny to see him tinkering with some tiny gadget under the pendant lamp hung over the dining area, especially when he chose to wear thick glasses on his big-ass nose.

Frank harrumphed with a frown. “You look cheerful.”

Shane had no idea that he’d been waiting for that opener. The truth was like a piece of candy melting on his tongue, so he chose to savor it on his own for that bit longer and approached the cupboards made of wood and junk Frank had found in his yard. Sometimes, Shane wondered whether the man enjoyed DIY so much or was just too stingy to pay for stuff from a store. Not that Shane cared as long as it didn’t affect his own pocket.

“Take a guess,” Shane said, pouring himself a glass of cool orange juice from the fridge.

Frank eyed Shane from head to toe. “You got laid.”

Shane spread his arms in triumph so fast some of his drink spilled down his fingers, but he ignored it and made a little bow. “Had the time of my life, man.”

This time, Frank shook his head and actually cracked a smile. “Did you finally learn how to use Grindr?”

In Shane’s time, Craigslist had been the preferred method of hooking up with randos, and he hadn’t yet gotten used to the new reality of having men at the touch of his thumb. Real-life chemistry couldn’t be beaten anyway. “No.”

“Gay bar? Hooker? Wait. You met someone at that frat. Spill.” Frank’s dark eyes widened, and he pulled off his glasses, forgetting his new unnamed project.

This was the level of attention Shane’s story deserved.

“Beck’s son,” he said, following it with a long, meaningful pause that would let the information sink in.

Frank got up. “What? I need a drink for this. Weren’t you supposed to plant the drugs on him and all that?”

“Change of plans,” Shane said, watching Frank pull a beer out of the fridge. “Boy’s fresh, hot, and sweet as fancy chocolate. Couldn’t keep my hands off.”

Frank seemed thoughtful when he leaned against the kitchen counter and took a swig of beer. He wore his work T-shirt, stained with paint marks, and without the glasses adding a certain dorky charm, even Shane considered Frank a dangerous-looking man. The tiger tattoos on his bulging arms seemed to bristle at Shane’s words.

“How old?”

“In college,” Shane answered and downed the sweet juice before reaching past his friend to get himself a can of beer of his own. The air around Frank vibrated with wariness, but Shane chose to ignore it and met his friend’s gaze. “I’m gonna ruin this boy. I’m gonna make him a total sex pest. Old Beck won’t know what hit him when his son confesses how much he loves my dick!”

Frank shook his head so abruptly, his long braid slapped the salt shaker on the counter, throwing it to the floor. “That’s your plan? What’s the kid done to you?”

That wasn’t the reaction Shane had been anticipating, but he dug in his heels and took a sip of beer. “Why are you worried about some privileged shit? He must have done *something* if he’s his father’s son. He literally deals drugs for his frat.”

Frank drank some more beer, pondering that with a scowl. “True. You know I’m on your side for life. Just make sure you don’t get in trouble because of it.”

“I’d have fucking put that bastard in acid and watched him melt alive if it wouldn’t have led the cops directly to my door. But fucking young sons of conservative politicians? Controversial but not illegal. I’ll make that

bastard's life crumble for what he did to me," Shane barked and rolled into an empty chair by the table. The can creaked when he squeezed it a bit too hard, and he put it down with an annoyed grunt. "I'm a no-good bastard, but I've not earned those ten years in the can!"

Frank sat at the table opposite him and nodded with a grim expression. "You took the fall that night, and I owe you for that. I regret taking Beck's call, you know? I should have left him to deal with his own shit, but I thought a guy like him could pay a lot for a body disappearing. We got greedy."

"It was stupid of me to go while drunk," Shane said, shaking his head. "Who were the cops gonna believe? A conservative family man who donated money to the local police each year, or a punk who'd already been arrested many times. I made it almost too easy for Beck to lie that he'd hired me to drive him that night."

Frank clinked his bottle against Shane's can. "Yeah, people like him always get away with shit. And the fucking audacity of him to claim that he did you a favor by getting your sentence down."

A cold sensation drizzled down Shane's chest, like water from a melting icicle. "So many fucking years wasted. I'm gonna destroy him, Frank, and I don't care who pays the price."

Rosen's face flashed through his head, with eyes pinned to Shane in silent desperation, but he shook the image off and met Frank's gaze across the table.

"What's his son like then? Frat boy footballer?"

It was past one a.m., but Frank always stayed up until morning on Halloween, because he claimed the kids got rowdy on a night like this and sometimes sneaked into the junkyard. Shane dreaded to think how Jag

would have dealt with a bunch of high-schoolers if he found them in his *den*, but it was none of his business.

“Nah. He’s more of an artistic type. With really long hair. Prettier than any I’ve had,” Shane mused, remembering the way Ros bit his lips while Shane was inside him.

Frank smirked. “Good. You deserve a nice piece of ass after all that time behind bars. Revenge is best served cold anyway.”

A scream outside made both of them jump to their feet in alarm.

Dex, Frank’s nephew, stumbled out of his room with a groggy expression, blond hair in disarray and colorful boxers clinging to his dick. “The fuck was that?” he asked as if any of them would know.

“Jag howling at the moon?” Shane suggested, not bothering to move, but Frank had already pulled a shotgun from under the sink.

“Might be intruders. Jag?” he called out, running for the door.

“I’ve got one here!” Jag yelled back, and that put even Shane in motion.

Still only in his underwear, Dex grabbed a metal baseball bat from the corner and followed Frank.

“I’m not an intruder! I’m Dexter’s friend!” a man yelled in a shaky voice.

Shane’s gait became sluggish as he shot a heavy glance the boy’s way. Because Dex, while of age, was definitely not mature enough to be considered a man. Frank made a gruff noise, clearly sharing the sentiment, but instead of outright berating Dex for the company he kept, he ran off the porch, toward Jag’s trim form propped over something that lay at his feet.

Only then did Shane see that there was a man lying on his stomach, and Jag had that idiotic spear poking into his back as he stood with one foot on the poor bastard’s ass.

“Why would a friend sneak up like you did?” Jag asked with a snarl, but Dex rubbed his eyes, approaching barefoot.

“Arnie?” he asked and lowered his baseball bat.

Frank groaned. “You *do* know him?”

The stranger looked up, showing a streak of mud that marred his averagely handsome face. He was closer to Shane’s own age than Dex’s, but as Shane had already noticed since coming back to live here, Dex did not discriminate.

“What is this, Dex? I just wanted to see you again!”

“I told you I can’t have people over!” Dex spread his arms with a groan.

He was just twenty-one, but in the two weeks since Shane’s release from prison, he’d already gathered that Frank’s nephew had an insatiable appetite for men, and more luck than brains. On the other hand, while short, he had a trim, muscular body covered in stupid tats, and a playful smile that had almost tempted Shane when he’d first arrived at Frank’s. The only reason nothing happened was Frank sternly telling Shane his nephew was off-limits. Shane respected the man too much to go against him, especially in a family matter.

Jag squinted at all of them and wouldn’t get off Arnie even when the man tried to scramble to his hands and knees.

“What?” Arnie whined. “You told me I can come after midnight...”

Frank lowered his shotgun, but turned to Dex with a scowl. With a face like that, he wouldn’t have needed a mask for Halloween. “Got something to tell me, boy?”

Dex bit his lip, avoiding Frank’s gaze, but the way he fidgeted told Shane he was considering whether he ought to shove his hook up under the bus. In the end, Dex spread his arms and approached Arnie. “Okay, I might

have said that. I got a bit fucked up on pills. Jag, get the fuck off him. His wife's gonna question each bruise you leave!"

Shane bit the inside of his cheek as he tried and failed to keep a straight face for Frank's benefit. Jag stepped away with a final growl, which only made the situation more surreal.

Arnie scrambled to his feet, eyes glinting in the glow of the lamp above the porch. "I don't care what she says! I only want you!"

Dex raised his hands so fast the baseball bat slipped from his fingers. "Whoa, man! We were just fucking. What the hell?"

Frank had more pressing concerns than the unfolding drama. "I told you no hook ups in the house! How hard is that to understand, huh?"

"But how is that fair though?" Dex complained. "You gonna tell *Shane* he can't bring guys over too? That's some tyrant shit, Frank!"

"Shane can take care of himself and at least remembers to use condoms," Frank roared. "You can't even fucking remember to take your PrEP on your own. You're twenty-one, so maybe it's time you took some responsibility?"

"First time?" Shane asked, patting a very disoriented Arnie on the back.

The guy had to take several deep breaths before speaking. "I... I thought we had something..."

Shane would have felt sorry for him, if he weren't so pathetic. "You could give *me* your number," he tried, but Arnie pulled out from under his hand, eyeing Dex with more despair than the kid was worth.

"I opened up to you!"

Dex shook his head. "You opened your legs, I opened my mouth, and that's about it."

Frank was done with the situation and butted in when Arnie's lips parted. "Go home. It's the middle of the night. If you can't see how much of a shithead my nephew is, then I really can't help you."

Shane was about to laugh, but a tingle at the back of his neck—the same one that had saved his skin in prison more than once—made him aware that something was off, and he glanced over his shoulder instead, frantic with the realization that Jag had disappeared like some fucking ghost. He hated the insane fucker.

"Let's finish up here, yeah? Enough excitement for one night."

Arnie shook his head, his face falling as if he were a kicked dog.

"Yo, Arnie! I'll call you!" Dex yelled even after Frank slapped the back of his head.

The married guy had enough self-respect to call out, "Don't you dare!" as he marched away from the house, no doubt followed by Jag, who'd creep after him all the way to the gate.

At least the freak would be out of Shane's hair.

"What the hell are you doing? Someone's gonna snap on you eventually if you keep up with this shit," Frank growled, pushing Dex toward the house.

Dex looked back at the baseball bat but must have decided to pick it up tomorrow. "I didn't know he was married at first. What's the worst that can happen, anyway? I can handle myself in a fight."

"If you get in trouble, I'll have to go after the guy, and I don't want you to wreck my business just because you can't keep it in your pants," Frank bitched, herding Dex into the house while Shane followed, starting to feel the weight of the late hour on his eyelids.

"Good luck with that, Franky. I'm out," he declared, stepping inside and heading down the dark corridor, toward the bedrooms.

His new room barely had enough space for a double bed, and the furniture was all second-hand, but it was his. Without a cell mate, with a door he could open any time he wanted, and a window with no bars in it. He might not own this house, but Frank would let him stay forever if he wanted, so it felt like a home he could get comfortable in.

Dex was still arguing with Frank in the kitchen when Shane closed the door and dropped to the bed, but there was comfort to this new, strange community. Even Jag, while a freak for many other reasons, was gay.

His new place might be a bit of a dump, and two of the other guys living here constantly got on Shane's nerves, but it was a home that offered him the freedom to be himself, which was more than he could have asked for.

With a smile tugging on his lips, he kicked off his shoes and dropped into bed, too tired to change from the clothes he'd worn to meet Ros. Now that he'd made his decision to pursue Beck Jr, he couldn't wait to start working on that first thing tomorrow.

His phone beeped just as he closed his eyes, and he couldn't help the flutter of excitement in his stomach when he saw the message was from Rosen.

[I can't stop thinking about you... <3]

Shane's revenge would be delicious in more ways than one.

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Chapter 4 – Ros

Ros was on pins and needles, and couldn't wait for the conversation with his father to end. He'd been afraid his sex with Shane was a hook up type of thing and the guy wouldn't care to answer his texts, but a few hours since Shane's response they were about to meet for an actual date at a café. Of course Ros's dad had to choose this exact moment to call and pester him about bullshit.

“Who told you I'm not making friends at the frat? I'm buddies with everyone.”

Well, at least to the extent that he brought in drugs and girls, but Dad didn't need to know that.

“I just got off the phone with Geoff, and his son told him everyone thinks you're standoffish. I specifically agreed to fund your artistic venture because you'd still make useful connections. If you can't do that, our agreement will be off,” Dad said in the same stern tone he'd used to lecture Ros about anything and everything in the past.

Rosen listened to him half-heartedly, too focused on filtering out Shane's form in the busy café. It was a nice, fresh-looking place with wooden floors and artwork by local painters hung on the walls. It

specialized in sourdough donuts, but after agonizing about his future all morning, Ros's stomach was too queasy for pastries.

"I'm not! I just go to different classes than most of the guys. I helped them organize the Halloween party, and got lots of girls to come." He also made a man *come*, but that was something Dad didn't need to know about. He was still tired after tossing and turning until morning with the image of Shane's cum-face stuck to the back of his eyelids.

"Really?" Dad asked, his tone rising to a higher pitch. "Any special girl?"

Ros stilled. He hadn't even considered how his dad might interpret his boasting. "There's one, but it's nothing serious yet," he said, because he had nothing to lose with that, and everything to win.

"Good! I'm happy you're coming to your senses. It'll be better that way. For everyone," Dad said, once again reminding Ros of the terrible day when he'd kind-of come out, only to be shoved right back into his teenage closet.

"It's a dumb phase," Dad had said.

He inhaled, ready to say some dismissive lie that would bring this meaningless conversation to an end when large, strong hands rolled down his shoulders to settle on his chest. His senses sharpened, and he could suddenly smell cologne over the aroma of fresh coffee and pastries.

Breath caught in his throat, because this could only be Shane. Touching him. In public. Ros could swear he saw the barista discreetly glance their way.

"It's very... better. Thanks. Gotta go!" Ros disconnected and slipped away from the touch under the pretense of turning around.

He could've just about melted, because Shane was even more handsome in daylight, and Ros hadn't imagined that being possible.

Dressed in faded jeans and a T-shirt featuring a fire-spewing dragon worn under an open jacket, Shane was both casual and more delicious than anything the menu could offer. But no matter how badly Ros wanted Shane's touch, someone from the university might see them, so he grabbed the warm hand and squeezed it, trying to ignore the melting sensation in his brain.

He was in so much trouble. And he loved it.

"Hey!" Ros smiled and got up to pull out Shane's chair for him, but then froze to the spot when Shane raised his eyebrows. "So... how do we do this? I mean, I invited you, so I guess I pay?" His tongue was twisting, mouth drying, and his heart already rushed past the speed limit.

He could only hope Shane still fancied him without all the shimmer and dazzle of the elven outfit. Ros remembered Shane liking his hair, so he wore the long waves loose, but after agonizing over his outfit for two hours, he'd settled on his tightest jeans, worn with combat boots, and a loose burgundy sweater with a wide neckline. He didn't want to look as though he was trying too hard, even though that was exactly what he was doing.

Shane's brows lifted, but he cracked a smile and sat in the chair offered to him. It was only when Ros stumbled back into his own seat that the hottest drug dealer who ever existed spoke, "But you let me fuck you, so my treat?" He winked at Ros.

Ros gave a nervous laugh and grabbed the napkin he'd been mindlessly drawing on during the wait. "Sorry you couldn't stay. I'm not out to anyone."

Shane's handsome face pinched, and he cocked his head, staring at Ros as if he wanted to grab a pair of scissors and cut his clothes open. "Really?"

Ros was about to answer, but a waiter came over to take their order, and he got stuck with a mouth full of words he couldn't articulate until they were on their own again.

"My dad's not of the most accepting sort, and I don't want to get in trouble with the other guys at the frat. They already think I'm weird for not loving football."

"That sucks. But hey, now you have a new gay best friend," Shane said, relaxing the atmosphere with another one of those smiles that transformed him into a roguish pirate on a quest to take over the Caribbean. If the Caribbean was Ros's heart.

"Oh. Just a friend? I mean, that's cool too," he added, squeezing the napkin in his fist. Shane's irises were even greener than he'd remembered, and Ros couldn't take his eyes off the symmetry of the man's face. The birthmark on the left above his lip and the crooked bridge of his nose somehow made all the other features seem even more harmonious.

Panicking, Ros was about to spit out more babble, but air got stuck in his throat when something pressed his foot under the table.

"Relax," Shane said, piercing him with his bright gaze. "I'm just messing with you. I couldn't be just friends with a hottie like you."

Ros couldn't even blink. "It was so hot, wasn't it?" he whispered, leaning closer. "I didn't know it would feel that good."

Shane's teeth dragged over his plump lip in a way that made Ros's brain glitch, leaving him at a loss.

"It was, wasn't it? It felt so good inside you." Shane's foot applied yet more pressure to Ros's, and invisible hands slid up and down his skin in the tight space between flesh and fabric.

"I thought I could easily go through college just focused on my art, but after last night, I don't think I can. I want to get to know you..." There.

He put his cards on the table like a man.

Shane kept smiling. What did it mean? Did he find Ros amusing or was he happy about everything being out in the open now?

“Sounds like a plan. I’m just curious how someone as hot and charming as you managed to keep his cherry for so long.”

Ros ran his fingers through his hair, feeling the flush stain his skin. “I’ve never met someone like you, but I also... I wasn’t intending this. My dad’s really strict, and he pays for my college, so... you know. But you have this energy about you that draws me.” Too woo-woo? He hoped not, because he couldn’t help his feelings.

“How would your dad know if you were up to no good behind his back? You’re dealing within your frat, and he hasn’t found out,” Shane said loudly enough to alarm Ros.

The waiter chose this moment to bring their coffees, so Ros had to wait through the agonizing silence before he could speak up.

“I’m no goody two-shoes. I just need to keep it on the down low. How about you? Is this how you always take care of customer satisfaction?” Ros smirked and dared wink at Shane, who smelled his black coffee before dropping in four cubes of fancy non-refined sugar.

“What if I said yes?” Shane asked, staring straight at Ros. It was a challenge. Was he also unsure about Ros’s intentions and fishing for information?

“I’d say you’re a slut,” Ros teased, more relaxed by the minute. Yes, he was still nervous, excited, and tingling all over, but Shane’s smiles were bringing out his playful side.

Shane chuckled. “Compared to you? Definitely. What if I corrupt you? Will Daddy mind?”

Ros bit his lip and poked Shane's foot. "He'll never find out, so there's nothing for him to mind. So... do you? Fuck around? Or would you focus on *this*?" He pointed between the two of them. So maybe it was needy. Whatever.

Shane leaned back, and for a terrible moment Ros was prepared for complete rejection, but he winked and dragged the side of his foot up Ros's calf. "I'm sure you can convince me to focus on you only, pretty boy."

Ros had been called handsome before, but not pretty, and he liked it more than he was willing to admit. He wouldn't consider himself competitive but he loved a little challenge. "I can think of many ways to keep you entertained. I could make a cast of your face."

"Like a death mask?" Shane asked, frowning.

Ros laughed out loud and kicked him gently. "No! I just think you're so handsome I wanna get a replica. How does that feel, *pretty boy*?" He stuck his tongue out between his teeth, exhilarated by how much fun he was having talking to Shane.

"How about a replica of my dick then? You seemed very enthusiastic about it last night," Shane said and wiggled his brows, taking a sip of his coffee.

Ros pulled on a curlier bit of his hair. "I might just need it between dates..." Did he really say that?

"I'll let you examine it later. So you can consider which materials to use."

Just thinking about it made Ros shift in his seat as his dick pulsed in response to the thoughts the conversation was provoking. "Something hard but flexible."

Shane rested his elbows on the table and hid behind his mug with brows hanging low over his eyes. "To be honest, this thing is a bit new for

me too. I haven't dated anyone... in a while."

"See? Now I get to be shocked. Only reason for that I can imagine is that *you* haven't wanted to."

The broad arms dropped, and Shane's green eyes clouded as he stared into his own reflection in the cup. "Life got in the way. And there's been no one who'd... who could make me want more than sex. But there's something about you, Ros. I think we might get along well," Shane said, his gaze appearing completely sincere. Maybe even a little shy.

Ros's heart fluttered at the same pace his dick hardened. "Is it my drug-dealing ways or how I can pull off a cloak?"

"In my line of business, you keep expecting a bullet in the back of the head. I like that I can see what you're thinking. But the cape was a nice touch," Shane said, winking.

Ros swallowed. "I wouldn't consider myself particularly dangerous, so you're safe with me." But was *he* safe with Shane? Or was he stepping too far out of his comfort zone? It was too late to go back, because his feet were dying to dance on the wild side.

The conversation moved on to less stress-inducing topics when Shane asked Ros about his university and plans for the future. By the time they'd eaten their muffins and finished their coffees, Ros was much more at ease. They hadn't decided what to do once they paid, but Shane had suggested Ros could get better acquainted with his beautiful cock, so maybe he'd be invited to a cool bachelor pad where Shane often had sex with different guys?

Ros was on the fence about the pinch of jealousy at the back of his neck but got distracted when Shane pulled out a fat wad of cash and dropped two notes on top of the bill.

“So is the night-time trade your main job?” Ros asked, unsure what to make of the money.

Shane smirked. “You make it sound like I’m a hooker.”

Ros bit his lip. “You know what I mean.”

“It’s not what I pay taxes for, but it brings the most cash,” Shane said and stuffed the money down his pocket. He didn’t seem to carry a wallet.

“Not afraid to lie to the IRS?” Ros teased but wasn’t sure if he was excited or a little bit scared.

“I’m not afraid of anything, honey,” Shane said and rose from his chair, ready to go.

There was such confidence in the way he moved that were Ros a different man, he’d have dragged him into the restrooms and tasted his cock for the first time before they’d even gotten their food. But he was a good boy and could wait for the right ambience.

“I can’t believe you just said that! It can’t be true.” Ros got up, already itching to hold Shane’s hand the way all his straight friends did with their dates. And yet he had to restrain himself until they were someplace private.

Shane’s hand brushed against his as they left the table behind, sending a jolt of electricity all the way to the top of Ros’s head. “Wanna bet? I’ll do any crazy thing you come up with,” he said and opened the door for Ros.

So maybe that was a bit revealing when it came to what kind of relationship they had going on, but Ros’s heart beat too happily for him to think straight.

“Okay. See that guy?” Ros pointed to a forty-something biker in leather, sitting with a blonde woman at a table just outside the café. “Go kiss his bald head and ask him where he gets it polished.”

Ros stiffened when Shane's brows went up, but before he could have recalled his request, his date turned on his heel and approached the couple like it was no big deal.

The biker had his thick paw under the woman's leather jacket as he kissed her, and remained unaware of the intruder until Shane bent forward, gave his tattooed head a smooch and asked, "Where do you get that polished?"

Ros burst out with laughter, but it died on his lips, when the biker shot up and scowled at Shane while all the other patrons went silent. A pin could have dropped and the echo of its clang would have carried for a mile.

"The fuck do you think you're doing?" the biker hollered, quick to push at Shane's chest.

The woman tried to grab at his jacket, but the biker brushed her off, his shoulders rising like pauldrons, to protect his neck. He was massive, like a truck about to trample the lean yet beautiful sports car, but when he reached forward to grab his opponent's collar, Shane ducked, escaping the grasp and spun, cutting the giant's legs from under him with a swing of his leg.

A scream died on Ros's lips when Shane shot up, grabbed the small plastic trash can from next to the server's counter, and then pushed it on the biker's head along with its contents.

Ros wasn't sure if he should laugh or run away in terror. Even Brad, the frat president, didn't have that kind of audacity. Shane wasn't lying. He really wasn't afraid of anything.

The fight had started so fast the waiter who appeared on the steps with plates of fancy salad froze, as if unsure whether he should back away or interfere. Heat spun inside Ros's head as he watched the scene, shocked that he'd been the one to cause it.

“Shane!” he yelled when he noticed the biker’s woman grabbing a fork off the table, but Ros’s date had stepped away already.

“Goodbye”, Shane told her and sped beyond the reach of the large outdoor umbrellas.

He grabbed Ros’s hand in his damp palm. His grin was bright enough to set the world on fire, and Ros wanted to savor its warm glow so much he refused to consider what the hand-holding meant to him. To everyone.

“I can’t believe you did that!” Ros yelled but didn’t question Shane when he was led to a silver sports bike. His car was parked on the other side of the lot, but he didn’t have the brain capacity to worry about leaving it when sitting close to Shane was on the cards.

“I told you,” Shane said, settling on the bike like a charming action movie hero about to take him on an adventure. “Not afraid of anything. Now hop on and let me take you somewhere special.”

Ros hesitated, glancing toward his blue Ford, but when the biker stormed out of the café, he sat behind Shane, hugging him tightly. The scent of earthy cologne enveloped his senses when Shane turned on the engine.

They were off a heartbeat later.

Ros had no idea where they were going, and he didn’t care.

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Chapter 5 – Shane

Shane had missed this.

Maybe.

A bit.

The danger seemed so much less *dangerous* when there was a whole world to run off to, and when the other guy couldn't pay Shane's cellmate to stab him in his sleep. But that rush of adrenaline? It was addictive and tasted sweeter when there was a beautiful boy cheering him on.

He wanted the moment to last, so instead of taking Ros back to campus, he chose the road through the nearby woods. As soon as they were out of sight, Ros had shifted closer, his hands squeezing Shane's pecs shamelessly and his hardening cock pressing into Shane from behind.

The air smelled of falling leaves and upcoming rain, but he felt so hot moisture would have evaporated straight from him the moment droplets hit his skin.

Shane sped up as the wind shook more brown, yellow, and faded green confetti off the trees, and he followed the glistening asphalt road farther away from the angry biker and his girlfriend, farther away from the noise, farther from people. He'd gotten so used to never being alone that the empty spaces in nature felt like voids that might claim him forever, but

today he had his bike. And the best-looking boy he'd ever gotten his hands on. As long as they were together, it would be easy to pretend that he was twenty-two and had never gone to prison.

The air here had an unfamiliar quality. It was damp, smelled of dying undergrowth and dirt, and was so fresh it burned in Shane's lungs, but he wanted to breathe more of it regardless.

He should have expected the rain, going by the darkening clouds, but it still somehow took him by surprise when the first droplets hit his helmet. Ros pushed his head into the crook of Shane's neck, silently reminding him that he had nothing to protect himself from the drizzle, which made the decision to pull into a small picnic area by the narrow road the obvious choice.

A dark red truck was parked on the other end of the muddy layby, but Shane saw no sign of its owners and figured they must have gone deeper into the woods. He drove up to the wooden gazebo and unfolded the kickstand, prompting Ros to rush under the roofing as the woods around them hummed ever louder.

Ros's happy laughter made Shane snort. While his intentions were less than savory, he had no trouble admitting that Rosen Beck was stupidly cute.

"Come on! You're getting wet!" Ros yelled from inside the gazebo and squeezed water out of his lovely hair. A guy like him would have become someone's prison bitch by the end of his first day of lockup, yet here on the outside, a pretty face and a laid-back attitude weren't weaknesses.

Out here, Ros could exude all the charm he wanted without the need to watch his back, because normal people didn't see him as a tasty morsel to claim. He had no way of knowing that a predator from a different kind of

world had invaded his in disguise and was about to sink its teeth into his sweet flesh.

Shane stumbled off the bike and entered the gazebo, putting his helmet on the narrow bench surrounding the interior. The paint covering the wood had long started chipping, but the concrete floor wouldn't get soft under their feet, and the roof, while surely inhabited by spiders and other critters, provided adequate shelter.

He had Rosen trapped.

But *the prey* walked up to Shane and caught his lips in a kiss.

"Do you think they called the cops?" Ros laughed, sliding his arms around Shane's waist. His hands were so warm where they touched Shane, but he caught them, unwilling to let the boy control the situation. He needed a clear head if he were to remain in charge.

"A biker would never call the cops, if he's the real deal," Shane murmured, his gaze swiping over the plump mouth that would have been the dream of any man in prison. Oh, it would have gotten so much use behind bars.

"Oh yeah? You hang out with bikers?" Ros's blue eyes made him look far more innocent than he was. Shane had to remind himself that the boy wasn't a fae prince but the son of a corrupt politician, who also dealt drugs on the side. It didn't matter how naive he seemed or whether he'd been a virgin last night.

"Maybe. And you know what some bikers do to pretty boys like you?" Shane asked, his flesh already cooking under the skin as he pushed Ros at one of the pillars supporting the roof.

Ros gasped, pupils widening in an instant. "What?"

Shane's laugh sounded like a growl when he pressed down on the elegant shoulders, eyes fixated on Ros's tongue, which darted from between

his lips to lick the corner of his mouth.

“They use them like this.”

Understanding passed Ros’s face, flushing his cheeks, but he got to his knees, running his hands along Shane’s sides. He faced Shane’s zipper, but still glanced out into the wall of rain.

“But be the lookout,” he whispered.

Shane exhaled, and his ears rang as he watched the handsome young man kneel on the dirty floor, ready to take his dick between those sinfully beautiful lips.

Shit. Was this happening? It had been so long since Shane had gotten head without the need to rush.

“Oh, I won’t let anyone else look at you.”

The beautiful smile from below just about melted his knees, and Ros never broke their eye contact as he leaned in and kissed the front of Shane’s jeans. “What if I’m bad at this?” Ros teased, only reminding Shane that he’d be the first to come in Ros’s greedy mouth.

“Then I’ll teach you everything there is to know about being my cocksucker,” he whispered, unable to take his eyes off the handsome face rubbing at his fly. His cock was already hard and bulged against the boy’s cheekbone.

The eager nod from Ros would have gotten any man stiff as a tree trunk. Ros went for Shane’s belt and opened it while licking his lips. Was he already imagining what his first cock would taste like? Just the thought of having Ros available to him every day made Shane’s shoulders lighter.

There he was. Free at last, smelling the rain, and about to get his dick sucked in a forest. Only now was it truly hitting him that he was *out* and there were no guards to pull them apart, if noticed.

He could enjoy his time with Ros as long as he wanted and make his move against Beck once his kid was completely debauched and eager to drink all the spunk Shane was willing to offer him.

“You look so damn hot down there, pretty boy,” he rasped, pushing his hand into the thick hair.

“I’m rather enjoying my view as well.” Ros winked at him and pulled down the zipper with an expression so hungry Shane had the impulse to hold him by the hair and feed him the cock he was waiting for. But Ros wasn’t a whore sucking dick for cigarettes, and Shane exhaled, trying to calm down. He wasn’t yet used to the new reality of having a lover he didn’t need to treat as a creature vastly different from him, and for a moment felt at a loss. What did this pretty thing expect from *him*?

When Ros let out a little whimper, Shane realized he’d pulled his hair a bit too hard, but that didn’t stop Ros from pushing Shane’s jeans and underwear lower to get his cock out.

“Fuck. It’s gorgeous,” Ros whispered when his hot breath tickled Shane’s dick like a promise of more.

Shane’s raspy laugh echoed under the dark roof as the rain intensified, drumming against the top of the wooden structure that kept them both dry. His cock, painfully hard and ready for whatever Ros could do, swayed in anticipation of touch.

“It’s waiting for your sweet tongue.”

Ros gave Shane one more smile before diving in. First for a kiss. His soft lips were like silk on Shane’s cockhead, and Ros’s fingers gliding up Shane’s hips only intensified the pleasure. But virgin boy was too impatient to toy with his first cock and took half of it in his hot mouth right away, sucking Shane into wet bliss.

“Oh, goddamn it,” Shane uttered, throwing his head back as that wet, hot mouth closed around him. He moved his thumb over smooth skin and finally made himself look down again, faced with the toe-curling sight of his dick stuck halfway in that innocent yet eager mouth. He couldn’t wait to plow it hard.

Ros tried to go deeper and take more of Shane’s dick, but only managed an inch before his throat constricted. Shane would teach him all there was to know about giving head, but they had time. For now, he’d enjoy watching a first-timer gag on a thick rod of meat, because that was a turn-on in itself.

“That... yeah, that feels good, pretty thing. Fuck, if I met you any time after your eighteenth birthday, you’d have been corrupted long ago,” he whispered, gently pulling at the thick hair to create a rhythm while the suction made the skin on his back tingle with pleasure.

Ros looked up with his big blue eyes. The big, regal nose made him appear older, but the pretty eyelashes messed with Shane’s head, reminding him how green this boy was when it came to sex. But inexperience didn’t stop Ros from putting his heart into sucking. His lips squeezed Shane’s cock, going back and forth over the thick length. One of Ros’s hands slid down Shane’s hip and between his legs to explore his balls. And, oh, was his confidence hot when it came from curiosity and willingness to explore. Shane hadn’t been with anyone like that before. The innocent ones were always either scared, or uncertain, yet Ros didn’t seem intimidated, and grinned up at Shane as soon as he dropped his damp cock into the cool air.

The little devil. He knew exactly what this was doing to Shane.

“I’ll be damned... I’ve got a natural on my hands,” Shane said and placed both his hands on Ros’s head, widening his stance while the slim, nimble fingers caressed his balls.

“You’re delicious,” Ros murmured and kissed the damp cock all over, but then stroked it slowly while delving in below it with his lips. “You taste good here too...” he said and licked Shane’s sac as if they had the time for this and weren’t in a semi-public space.

Maybe it was the way Ros acted, or maybe it was the rain, but something prompted Shane to stop rushing, even though his dick begged to be sucked again. He’d been conditioned to quick fucks, and he couldn’t wait to shed that habit.

“Fucking hell. If your daddy knew—” Shane whispered, petting Ros’s head as the rain hummed around them, creating a gray and green wall to shield them from unwanted attention. The air was oddly sweet, as if Ros’s personality had melded with their surroundings, making everything feel brighter and tastier.

“He won’t. Just you and me,” Ros said as if they were sweethearts, not two guys eager to fuck each other’s brains out.

He gave Shane’s balls one more kiss and was back to sucking cock as though it was his favorite candy. He put his whole body into it, swaying his shoulders and hips while his warm hand snuck up Shane’s stomach, its glide making Shane’s cock throb and rise as if his dick were attached to it by an invisible thread.

Shane had gotten used to taking his pleasure fast, but the sudden heat that overcame his body when Ros got to work for real was incomparable with the dirty deeds done in prison. It seeped into his blood and fizzed in his skull, as if he’d just gotten high on the purest, most delicious ecstasy pill.

He gasped for air, trembling over the handsome boy, but when Rosen leaned forward and choked around the hot dick while looking straight into Shane’s eyes, playtime was over. Cum shot out of Shane’s balls so

forcefully he grabbed at the wooden support, caught between pleasure and pain.

He kept Ros in place by the hair, but it wasn't as if the boy was trying to back away. No, he was excited for his first mouthful of cum and swallowed. He wanted to service Shane for no other reason than pleasure. For a second, Shane's vision became blurry with the pure lust flooding him right before the last shot of spunk left his cock.

Ros suckled on Shane's softening dick for a moment longer before backing away with shyness blooming on his flushed face as if he hadn't just given head with the enthusiasm of a pro. He glanced up with a silent question, and Shane grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him up. His tongue dove between the bruised lips, and the familiar, salty flavor at the back of that soft tongue made his knees go softer.

"Oh, baby boy. You are so good," he rumbled, squeezing the front of Ros's pants.

Hard. As expected.

Ros moaned into the kiss, wrapping his arms around Shane's neck. "I already wanna do it again. I'm gonna get addicted to your dick."

He'd become a complete slut for Shane's dick, and when the time came, Shane would make sure to capture that on video.

That way, Ed Beck couldn't run from the truth about his son. His conservative followers would reject him, and the bastard's career would be over. But for now, Shane had the exclusive enjoyment of beautiful Rosen Beck, and he'd not let a minute of it go to waste.

He spun the boy around, so his firm back lay against Shane's chest, and kissed his neck, already unzipping the strained fly.

A moan of approval left Ros's lips, and he rocked against Shane like a bitch in heat. The moment Shane gripped Ros's cock, the needy movements

only became more insistent, and Ros arched his head to the side, offering up his neck. He had no idea he was prey, and Shane wouldn't let him in on that secret just yet.

He'd keep up the charade and tease this eager doe until he sucked out all of his juices.

His fist pumped up and down the shaft, but Ros was already getting to his toes, his fragrant hair tickling Shane's face, head rolling along Shane's shoulder like the sweetest weight.

The cock in Shane's hand pulsed, and a long string of cum shot to the dirty floor, followed by several more while the strong yet slender body shook in Shane's arms.

"Fuck... Fuck..." Ros gasped for air, running his fingers up and down Shane's arms, and if Shane hadn't been so spent himself, the pressure of that gorgeous ass wiggling against his dick would have gotten him hard again.

Ros rested more of his weight on Shane, once again reminding Shane that the boy trusted him and wasn't watching his back the way everyone in prison had. He didn't know how bad the world could be, innocent and excited about his first ever man. Shane couldn't help himself, and kissed Ros's slender neck once more.

"You're the hottest guy I've ever had," he mumbled, burying his face in the fragrant hair before gravitating to the bench, because his legs would only hold him up for so long.

Despite his cock still being out, Ros's smile was so angelic that Shane had to look away, because it was doing something mushy to his insides, and he didn't know how to deal with that sensation.

"What's your body count then?" Ros asked with a laugh, and it took Shane a while to understand that he didn't mean how many corpses Shane

had dealt with.

“Oh... I’m not sure,” he muttered, at a loss and surprised that Ros would even want to know such things. “Does jerking off together count?”

The vast majority of his sex life in prison had involved blowjobs and handjobs, but he’d fucked a lot before that.

Ros tucked his cock back into his pants and straddled Shane’s lap when he sat on the bench. “I’m just teasing. I don’t care where you got your training wheels.” He winked at Shane and hugged him with a satisfied sigh.

Once again, Shane found himself breathing in the scent of shampoo from that silky hair, and the pleasant cologne clinging to the warm neck, and despite already knowing where this... thing between them was going, he decided to forget about it for now and enjoy the moment.

It felt good to be held.

He hadn’t had that for a real long time.

“Well good. I’m happy you’re so eager to learn.”

“Who wouldn’t with such a good teacher?” Ros laughed in such a carefree way Shane couldn’t help but feel jealous. While Shane had been rotting away the best years of his life, the boy in his arms had been loved and pampered by the very man Shane hated.

It wasn’t fair.

“So no one knows about you?”

Ros tightened the hug and kissed Shane’s ear. “No. My dad... He’s really homophobic, and only cares about appearances. I tried to come out to him a few years ago when he walked in on me watching a gay movie—not porn, just, you know, but he wasn’t having it. He thinks it’s a choice, and that I was just trying to spite him. All he wants is that no one knows, so he promised to pay for my college. He even agreed to me doing art as long as I joined a frat and had no boyfriends.”

Shane stared at him. “He knows? You think he wouldn’t care as long as no one found out?” he asked, weirded out by the concept. In his vengeful dreams, Ed Beck was horrified by his son’s sexual orientation, so this spoiled his plan a bit.

Ros’s gaze drifted off in a thoughtful expression. “I think he blocked it out. Maybe he just thinks that he straightened me out by paying for my college. Joke’s on him, I’ll be out once I’ve got my diploma. But... I do want to see you. Is it okay with you that we stay in the closet for now? And what’s it like for you? Do your friends know?”

Shane exhaled with relief. He’d hidden his sexuality for the past ten years, despite fucking guys, and handholding in public might be a bit too much for him. “All my roommates are gay. Do any of *your* friends know?”

“No... But I have this friend who’s bi, and I think she might be suspecting me, but we kinda never talked about it. So you have roommates? What about your parents? Um... how old are you?” Ros laughed off this barrage of questions and nuzzled Shane’s ear.

A jolt traveled down Shane’s neck, all the way to the tips of his toes, but he managed to keep his voice steady. His parents were not people he’d want any of his friends to meet. “Mom and Dad... they’re not around anymore. But it’s not like I need them at thirty-two, right?”

“I guess not. So you live with a group of gay friends? That sounds really cool.” The gentle fingers stroked his nape as the rain poured around them, creating a bubble of comfort.

Shane closed his eyes and put an arm around Ros, eager for his warmth. “I’m mostly friends with one of them, Frank. Not that close with the others. One’s a weirdo, the other’s Frank’s oversexed nephew. That kid causes lots of drama.”

“Have you... with any of them?” Ros asked carefully.

Shane could laugh at the innocence infusing this question. Any of his jail buddies would have straight up asked if they fucked.

“Used to, with Frank. But that was a long time ago. We’re not really each other’s type. He couldn’t compare to you when it comes to good looks,” Shane said with a smile.

Ros snorted. “Oh yeah? Shorter hair?”

“Nah. But he’s built like a bear.” Shane squeezed Ros’s slender yet muscular thigh. “Am I your type, or did I just happen to be around?” he asked, watching the boy’s reaction. And in that moment, he knew that as much as he wanted to keep fucking Rosen regardless, he did care about the answer to that question.

Ros bit his lip with the smile sparkling in his eyes. “You’re very much my type. I’ve always liked guys who were a bit older than me. I had a crush on my teacher back in high school. It was embarrassing.”

Shane couldn’t help the grin spreading on his mouth. “A teacher? Really? Did you imagine crawling under his desk and blowing him during class?”

Ros laughed and punched his shoulder. “Stop it! I kinda imagined staying after class, him helping me with an assignment, and you know, one thing leading to another...”

“I could teach you some other things,” Shane said with a wiggle of his brows.

“Oh yeah? How to tell coke from ecstasy?”

“Don’t take either,” Shane said, resting his hands on Ros’s buttocks and leaning in to smell his neck. “So... you’re dealing because your allowance is too small or—”

Ros sighed. “I’m trying to save up a bit just in case, so I have something of my own once I finish college, since it’s very probable Dad

will cut me off once I'm out. On one hand, I don't wanna think about it too much, but on the other, I'm not stupid. I need to have some kind of safety net, and I'm pretty sure he keeps the stream of cash small so I keep being dependent on him. I think he likes the control. Plus, he's a Scrooge. He'll literally give me coupons for things instead of money."

This didn't sound like the kind of father-son relationship Shane assumed the Becks had at all, but he shook off the sense of unease that snuck its way into his gut and got busy kissing Ros's graceful neck. "Sounds like he's a bit of a scumbag."

"It's... not ideal. The only person he spares no expense on is my stepmom. She's the weather lady at Channel Six, and it looks good if a politician's spouse is glamorous. You know, the aspirational kind of wife for his voters," Ros said with a bit of bitterness to his voice, but then his lips quirked, and he arched his back with a beautiful smile. "What do you want to do other than dealing? Or are you a live-in-the-moment kinda guy?"

Shane froze. He'd only been out of prison for two weeks, and while there was some allure to dealing, there was nothing hot about working at a junkyard. And he definitely didn't want to talk about his *other* side gig, so he took his time, breathing in the delicious cologne. "I'm... I'm saving money for my own business."

"Oooh! What kind of business, *boyboss*?" Ros's smile was so wide even the rain seemed to disperse and become less heavy.

"A what? Do I look like a boy to you?" Shane asked, unsure whether he was being made fun of.

Ros nuzzled his cheek. "I'm just teasing. You know, like *girlboss*, but—no, seriously, Shane. Never mind. Tell me about the business."

The apology soothed Shane's agitation, and he pulled Ros closer, trying to think on his feet. Maybe he should have just told Ros the truth?

But as he agonized what kind of random idea to pitch as his grand plan for the future, one came to him unexpectedly. And he wasn't resenting it.

Back in prison, he'd been part of an assistant dog training program, and he'd been damn good at it. Why wouldn't he keep doing it, this time for cash?

"I want to train dogs for blind people."

It felt like winning the jackpot when Ros's blue gaze softened for him. And the best thing was that Shane meant it. That the job he'd mentioned wasn't a sweet, manipulative lie, but something he'd enjoy, if the future offered him the right opportunities.

"Aww. That's such a good idea! Do you have a dog?"

Shane's shoulders dropped. "The last one passed on some time ago"—had been given away to the person who needed it—"I'll have to discuss it with Frank."

"If you do decide to get one, you'll have to take me with you to choose." Ros pushed back his hair, happy in Shane's lap as if he had no care in the world. Shane was jealous of Ros's peace of mind but also desperately wanted to be a part of his reality.

Ros froze, clutching at Shane's shoulders. "Don't move," he whispered, staring to their right, beyond the gazebo.

Had the owners of the truck returned?

Shane followed Ros's eyes, but every muscle in his body stiffened when he spotted a black bear shoving its head into a large trash can.

He squeezed Ros's thighs, and he looked around for something he could use as a weapon. "If it comes close, you'll climb to the roof," he whispered.

The tremble in Ros's breath awoke an unexpected need to take charge. He wasn't sure if it was because Ros was physically weaker than

him, or because they'd just had sex and he was on a hormone high, but he was ready to fight that fucking bear over him.

"Is this the one you should look in the eye, or *shouldn't*?" Ros asked in a high-pitched voice.

"I don't fucking care about its feelings. If it comes any closer, I'll fuck it up."

"Okay, let's just... not move." Ros seemed to have stopped breathing altogether as they watched the wet bear drag something out of the trash with its paw, without paying them the slightest bit of attention.

"Fine. But I won't let it get any closer," Shane grumbled, holding on to Ros as the animal dug through the bag of trash, unaware of their presence.

Ros was like a statue in his lap, but the way he held on to Shane spoke volumes of his fear. "I think it's leaving..." he whispered when they saw the bear grab the bag with its teeth and drag it away.

Shane's hands got sweaty, but he wouldn't let go and watched the beast disappear between the trees. The pulsing, which had been booming in his skull, quieted, and he leaned back to look at the tense expression on Ros's face. "Hey, it's fine. I wouldn't have let it touch you."

Ros laughed nervously but tightened his arms around Shane. "What would you have done? Punched a bear for me?"

Shane winked at him. "I don't discriminate. Man, bear, if they go for your pretty face, they're gonna pay," he said with self-satisfaction.

Ros gave him another kiss and slid off his lap, still pale as he looked back to where the wild animal had been moments ago. "That's too sweet, but let's go in case it comes back for seconds."

"Yeah, fine," Shane was still wary of leaving the gazebo, but there was no trace of the beast, and how could he resist when the elf prince

himself was pulling him along by the hand?

It was still raining though, and he stopped Ros right before he walked into the drizzle. “You want my jacket?”

The boy hesitated, and a new kind of tension sparked between them like static. “Yes. Won’t you be cold though?”.

“I’m naturally warm. And I’ll just change once I get home. It’s no big deal,” he said and pulled off the jacket before opening it for Ros. Doubts and shame sprouted in his mind before he’d even done it, but the shimmer of excitement in the blue eyes made his mouth stretch into a smile.

So maybe it wasn’t something he’d ever done for a guy he slept with, but the boy clearly liked it. Something to remember, if Shane was to be successful at going through with his plan.

Once in Shane’s jacket, Ros stroked Shane’s chest with a little smile. “So... Do you wanna be my boyfriend? I can’t be out, but *we’d* know. And it’s not because I’d want to hide *you*, just cause of my dad.”

It was the perfect solution for Shane. He’d get to have his cake and eat it, but he couldn’t chase off the warm breeze blowing through his cold chest at the suggestion that if it wasn’t for Ros’s financial situation, he’d be open to make his relationship with Shane public.

The elven prince holding the hand of an ex-convict. It made no sense, yet pride still swelled in Shane’s chest. “Yeah... yeah, why not? Let’s do it.”

Ros grinned at him and gave him another kiss before straddling the bike. Shane couldn’t wait for those arms around him again.

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Chapter 6 – Ros

Ros pressed his thumbs into clay, molding the shape of Harlene's eyebrows. She was mixed race and had beautiful features with a large nose and a whole scattering of dark freckles. As friends, they often posed for each other for practice, and Harlene would paint his portrait while he sculpted, which meant they ended up spending hours in each other's company.

After two years at the university, the studio felt like a second home with its tall ceilings, and massive windows letting in a flood of light, regardless of the weather. The air here always smelled of paint thinner, oil, and clay—an addictive aroma that so often mingled with that of coffee. Where the frat buzzed with noise and testosterone, this place was where material objects could transform into something out of Ros's fantasy, making reality into whatever he wished it to be.

"Ros, are you listening to me?" Harlene asked, shifting by her easel. Her hair, cropped short around the skull, had been dyed a dirty green, which went well with her cool complexion.

"Huh? Yes... I mean, no, okay, I drifted off. You were saying?" He smiled apologetically.

His new habit of daydreaming had become a bit of an issue, but the sudden change in his life was like a pink fog clouding his thoughts. The past two weeks had been such a whirlwind of sex, romance and all things Shane, that sometimes he'd ponder their secret meetings or the dates yet to come, without noticing his surroundings. Just the other day, he'd walked into a tree, and a group of children picnicking with their moms nearby laughed at him so hard the parents felt the need to apologize.

"You've been awfully absent-minded," Harlene said, raising one eyebrow.

Of course she would have noticed the change in him. The question was, what was he to do about it?

He could bluff and lie that he'd been in yet another of the countless arguments with Dad, or that he worried about his future in the art world, but he saw her as his closest friend, and while he'd never explicitly told her he liked guys, the fact that she herself swung both ways suggested that out of all his friends, she might be the most understanding. And if she found out, then maybe he wouldn't have to deal with this new thing in his life on his own anymore.

Ros hummed and picked up a small chisel to put the freckles on his sculpture. "But it's a secret, okay?"

Harlene smirked. "My lips will be sealed."

"You know how I said I can't date in college."

"Juicy. Go on."

"So I kinda met this guy..." Ros's heart skipped a beat, and his throat clenched, as if it were about to stop him from saying anything more. He trusted Harlene, but the need to hide that part of himself was ingrained so deeply he'd have to remove a chunk of flesh to get rid of it. His hands

shook, so he ended up putting the chisel away and wiping his hands on a dirty piece of cloth.

Her smile widened, reaching the brown eyes in a flood of glee. “Oh my god, do I know him?” she asked in the same way he’d have expected if he’d mentioned a girl. As if she’d either expected him to like guys or didn’t see any difference between the two.

He found it hard to meet her gaze and breathed deeply in hopes of slowing his frantic heartbeat. “No, he’s a bit older, but we met at a party and things kinda spiraled out of control. I didn’t wanna act on this side of me, because you know how my dad is, but it’s too late now.”

Harlene put away her brush and dragged her stool closer, grabbing his clay-encrusted hand. “You shouldn’t put your life on the backburner because of your dad.”

Ros had been unaware of just how much he needed this reassurance before she’d offered it. He squeezed her fingers. “It’s just so risky. He’ll cut me off if he finds out. Maybe I shouldn’t give a shit, but I don’t wanna make my life harder for no reason. I thought it would be easy to sail through college and focus on art, but this guy... he’s something else. It feels like I’m going crazy.”

“Do tell! Who is he?” Harlene pulled her feet up, sitting cross-legged on the stool.

Ros had been seeing Shane almost every day, but faced with that question, his mind became blank. How was Shane best described? Charming. Dangerous.

But Ros didn’t even know where Shane lived. And his job? Not something to boast about.

“His name’s Shane, and he really likes dogs. He’s trained quite a few.” There. Respectable.

Because what was Ros to say? ‘I didn’t have time to ask much between blowjobs and fucking’?

“Oh, so he’s a behaviorist or something like that?” Harlene asked excitedly and tapped her thighs.

“Yes, you could say that he’s a dog trainer. And... you know, really hot.” Ros laughed with heat flushing his face. “We just get along so well. I actually like that he’s a bit too cocky at times, it makes seeing him so much fun.”

“Do I get to meet him?”

“It’s all very fresh. Maybe in a while, if things progress the right way.” In fact, in Ros’s heart, things had already progressed, but he didn’t want to put Shane on the spot.

“Wow, and is he out?” Harlene exhaled and rubbed her cute face. “Sorry. Can’t believe you finally came out! That’s so huge!”

Ros snorted. “*Finally?* Seriously?”

Harlene raised her hands. “Hey, don’t blame me for noticing how you treat all girls as friends and never try to get into their pants!”

Ros bit his lip. “Oh yeah? You didn’t just make assumptions because I’m so into my art?”

“I don’t think it’s something everyone notices, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He sighed with relief. “I’ll fly that rainbow flag once I’ve got my degree. It’s weird how I’ve been able to keep it under wraps for so long, but the moment he stepped into the picture, I feel like I lost my mind.”

Harlene grinned. “Yeah, that’s how it usually works when you have chemistry. If he’s a good guy, you shouldn’t stop yourself from having fun. And since he’s not a student here, it’s unlikely anyone’s gonna find out.”

Good guy. Was Shane a good guy? He was a drug dealer who'd followed Ros to his room the night they'd met. But then again, who was Ros to judge anyone when he dabbled in drug-dealing himself? He didn't even care that one of his frat brothers was a bit too into the stuff, because that guy was a douche.

"That's what I'm thinking. We mostly keep it off-campus anyway —"

He stilled when someone knocked three times. The door opened the moment Harlene started saying *come in*, and Ros's skin bloomed with heat so intense he feared it might've been glowing.

Shane looked so damn good in that denim jacket and pants that were such a perfect middle ground between body-hugging and comfortable that he found himself staring at him in awe.

Ros didn't remember telling Shane where his studio was, but who cared about such details when his heart skipped a beat as their eyes met. All he could think about was those skillful hands all over him, lips touching his skin, teeth marking his thighs—

"H-hey," he uttered, casually reaching for the bun on his head, because he knew Shane loved his long waves hanging past his shoulders.

Shane nodded at Harlene before focusing on Ros with a wide smile. "They told me I could find you here at the reception." He let that hang in the air for a few seconds, and Harlene cleared her throat, sliding off the stool.

"Damn it, I forgot I need to pick something up," she said, sending Ros a sly smile.

Ros bit his lip. "See you tomorrow!" he called out, but as soon as she was gone, all of his attention was on Shane. Ros should've scolded him for coming over unannounced, but he was too giddy to see him to be angry.

Shane walked around the studio with a bit of swagger in his wide shoulders, and the confidence with which he moved melted Ros's insides before setting the remaining goo on fire.

"I might have slipped and told her about you," Ros confessed.

Shane stilled, his mouth freezing, but then he grinned, placing his hand on Ros's shoulder, only to slide it straight to his nape. "Oh, have you boasted how I almost saved you from bear mauling?"

Ros snorted. "I didn't get to that part. I was too busy boasting about your blowjob skills," he teased, and leaned in to nuzzle Shane's jaw. The scratch of stubble against his nose sent a shiver down his spine, but Shane remained still, as if the touch did nothing for him. Before Ros could have asked what was wrong, the strong arm pulled him closer, and Shane pointed at the unfinished clay model of Harlene's face.

"That's the girl who just left... did you make that?" he asked, sounding surprised.

Pride buzzed inside Ros at the expression on Shane's face, and he poked him with his elbow. "I told you I sculpt. Did you really think I only make molds of dicks?" Which was their ongoing joke.

Shane frowned, and the groove between his eyebrows deepened, somehow making him even more handsome. He shifted away from Ros and leaned toward the unfinished sculpture, but before Ros could have told him that the clay was still wet, Shane resisted the urge to touch it.

He grunted, bit his lip, then peered at Ros with narrowed eyes, which in the bright light of the setting sun resembled two shiny marbles. "Yeah, but I didn't think it was like some Michelangelo shit."

Ros could've melted. He grinned and stroked Shane's chest. If he'd been a cartoon character, he'd have had stars in his eyes. "It will be when you pose for me."

Shane pointed his thumb at himself, but the frown gradually transformed into the smirk that never failed to charm Ros's pants off. "Oh, what will the posing involve, and do I have to pay for it?" he asked, grabbing Ros's belt and pulling him close.

Ros laughed and wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, intoxicated by his earthy scent. "It's me who would have to pay my life model. Especially since I would prefer him naked..."

"You see me naked all the time, my prince." Shane snickered and pressed a kiss to Ros's mouth before once more looking at the messy ball of clay that would later transform into Harlene's ear. "So is this like... regular mud?"

Ros turned to his own creation, surprised by the question. He didn't expect for Shane to care about his art. "No, I buy the clay at an art store. It's not even my favorite medium really, but it's for this class. The teacher requires a realistic study of a person. I'm still going to give her elf ears. Do you think I can get away with it?" Or was he just babbling about boring shit Shane didn't care about?

"It still looks like her. I'd do it if it pissed off the teacher," Shane said and moved his fingers up Ros's forearm at a pace so tantalizing that for a moment it felt as though Ros's feet might lift off the floor.

Ros laughed, fighting the urge to jump Shane's bones, but there was risk, and there was *risk*. "They'd be realistic ears, even if elven. The guy is really into very traditional sculpture, and I like fantasy elements, mixed media, and utilizing found objects. I get that everyone needs to learn the foundations, and I like that I can see my skills growing fast, but still—"

"So, what kind of thing do you want to sell for millions to people who don't know what to do with their money, Mr. Big Time Artist?" Shane asked, clearly as aware of the fumes of attraction simmering in the air as

Ros was. He stepped toward him, making Ros back against the counter by the window.

Ros could've drowned in his green eyes, and he hadn't even noticed when the hot waters of lust had reached his jaw and made him salivate. "I don't know about those *millions*, but I want to do large-scale stuff. A life-size Pegasus or a giant. I want to bring these fantastical creatures and beings to life in a way that makes them impossible to overlook. To make something that was just a dream into reality."

"But wouldn't a massive thing like that not be difficult to keep out of the rain?" Shane asked, gathering a bit of clay from Ros's workstation. He pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and then, with a roguish smile, used it to make horizontal marks on Ros's cheekbones.

Ros laughed at the audacity of it and slapped his hand. "Clay doesn't stay wet forever. Besides, I could make them with metal, or plastic, or foam, and there are so many other options. And if it rusts, I'd let it, and over the years, it could get covered in moss. Take on a life of its own."

"Are you trying to make nature in an unnatural way?" Shane crooked his head and placed both hands on Ros's hips, pinning him by the counter. The afternoon sunshine coming through the window brightened his eyes, but despite the pleasure of Shane's presence, Ros couldn't help being aware that someone could see them from outside.

He glanced out the window, but his hands slid up and down Shane's chest of their own accord. "I suppose so. To create my own reality."

Shane hummed and leaned in, but instead of kissing Ros, he nipped his brow, triggering a shudder. "Is there a place for someone else in that world of yours?"

The butterflies were at it again, fluttering in Ros's stomach like mad. "There could be. A handsome rogue to steal away the fairy prince." How

could one man drive him crazy like this in a matter of weeks? Maybe Shane wasn't really a man at all but an incubus out for Ros's life force?

"The prince would be lost to the world once the rogue drags him to his lair," Shane teased, and when his thigh pushed between Ros's legs, a jolt of pleasure spiralled through him like lightning through a bottle.

"Unless he invited the rogue to his castle." Ros winked and gave Shane a quick kiss, unable to look away from the piercing eyes. "There's an event at one of the sororities, and most of the frat guys are away to help out with preparations. Wanna come over?"

"Oh, do I ever. Lead me to your bedchamber, your highness," Shane rumbled, and squeezed Ros's dick through his pants with a wide grin when it got him the reaction he wanted. Ros could barely take more of this teasing!

Ros grabbed his hand, even though he'd have to let it go once they went out into the corridor. The next ten minutes were a blur of sexual tension that couldn't be released. He sat on the back of Shane's bike, pretending he wasn't half-hard already, but at least he wasn't the one who had to take them home.

The frat house was on the other end of the massive campus, and the few minutes of riding so close together were like extended torture. Ros's skin was damp under his clothes, and his dick uncomfortably hard by the time they reached the parking at the front of the frat, but dusk would aid Ros in hiding his raging hard on until they reached his door.

Shane smelled like the woods after rainfall: earthy and welcoming yet mysterious, and Ros couldn't wait to step into his arms again.

The massive house was silent when they walked in, and Ros laughed when his lover slapped his butt, urging him upstairs. In the past weeks, it

had become clear how much he loved a rough tumble in the sheets, and he couldn't wait for Shane to drag him over the mattress.

Getting impatient while Ros fumbled with the key to his room, Shane pressed himself against his back and dragged his hot tongue over the back of his ear before gently gliding it down his neck.

It was near impossible to focus in such circumstances.

"I can't find the keyhole," Ros complained, biting his lip, because he knew damn well he was asking for an innuendo. And Shane delivered with as much ease as he always did.

"My key on the other hand knows exactly where its hole is," he rasped, rocking his groin against Ros's ass. His body molded itself to Ros's, sandwiching him against the door in a way so delicious Ros forgot what he'd been complaining about in the first place.

He groaned in pleasure, but the sound died on his lips when someone else spoke.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Brad exclaimed not far away, making Ros turn so fast he pushed Shane at the banister behind them.

"It's not what you think! We were just goofing around—"

But Brad was pale as a sheet as he looked between them and shook his head. "I don't care. This is the least of our problems. Pete is *dead*."

Ros stared at him in disbelief. "What?"

"Pete went on a *trip*. And it was a fucking bad one!" Brad spread his shaky hands, as if he were trying to grasp at something that no longer existed.

Pete. The gay Batman who liked what Shane and Ros brought into the frat a bit too much.

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Chapter 7 – Shane

The fucking idiot hadn't yet gone cool, but his heart had been still for long enough that looking for any sign of life seemed pointless. And the other idiot, Brett—or was it *Brad*—hadn't bothered to close his ex-friend's eyes, too afraid to not only touch the dead body but even approach it.

Judging by the way he pressed his back to the door and dug his heels into the floor, he wouldn't have entered Pete's bedroom if he wasn't personally involved.

"Fuck... fuck... I told him he was taking them too often," Brad squeaked as Shane knelt next to the dead frat boy and pulled his eyelids down over cloudy eyes.

Shane had seen his share of overdose cases, and it was never pretty. This one at least hadn't managed to shit himself in his final moments, but the faint odor of urine hung in the air like fog.

Ros was a basket case in the corner, scooting with his hands over his nape and hyperventilating. A sorry sight, because the usual dreamy attitude suited him much better.

"We're all going to prison," Ros whimpered, and while Shane should have felt a twinge of satisfaction at seeing Beck's son in this state, his instincts told him to stroke the boy's hair and tell him it would be all right.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s gonna be fine,” he muttered, rising to his feet. But before he could have reached his side, Brad stood in the way with eyes so bloodshot he might have taken the same stuff as his cooling friend.

“It should only be you. It’s your... stuff that killed him!”

Oh, so they weren’t *treats* anymore?

Shane slapped him across the face, and the fucker stepped back, staring at him with tears gathering in his eyes as if he were a little kid scolded by his mother.

“Man up. You were the one buying, and I have proof. So shut the fuck up, and if you’re not gonna help, at least don’t make my life harder!”

“What kind of help can I even offer? He’s fucking dead—” Brad’s voice broke when it reached a high pitch, but it was Ros’s sob that grabbed all of Shane’s attention.

Ros hid his face in his hands, and the long hair obscured him further, but his shoulders trembled.

Shit.

“Hey, it’s gonna be all right,” Shane muttered, touching his chest when it sank under an unexpected sense of pressure. He scooted in front of Ros and squeezed his hot arm.

One could always count on a fucking junkie to spoil a perfectly good mood! Seemed like Shane wouldn’t be getting his sex tape today.

“It won’t.” Ros sobbed again, but looked up, so vulnerable and raw with tears dampening the streaks of clay on his cheeks that it took Shane’s breath away. Not only because Rosen was a picture of beauty, but because he had no shame in the way he expressed his fear.

For years, Shane had lived around men who considered weakness a fatal flaw, something to be used against others. Ros was nothing like them.

While not entirely innocent, he depended on Shane for his safety, just like when they'd encountered the bear.

"Look, if I say it will be all right, then it will. Do you understand me, boy?" Shane asked, cupping his flushed face with both hands.

Brad made a noise in the background, but Shane ignored him, hypnotized by the foggy blue gaze watching him with so much hope he wanted to dive in and let it hug him.

What the hell was wrong with him? This wasn't a time to go soft, yet he couldn't help himself.

Ros dropped to his knees and hugged Shane as if he feared the floor might crumble and suck him into the abyss. "How though? Pete's dead, and yeah, it's his fault, but I helped bring this stuff in."

Shane wasn't used to taking care of people, yet Ros handed himself over into his care. It felt like when he'd gotten his first puppy to train. Back then, he'd expected to be unfeeling, yet those big eyes had met his, and he couldn't help the flood of emotion.

He should've felt burdened by two frat boys who didn't know how to police their friend's drug intake, yet the fact that Ros trusted him so much only made Shane feel more powerful. Like he mattered. Like he could be useful and help Ros in a way that would never be forgotten.

He pulled him closer, and it seemed Ros had been waiting for that gesture because he melted against Shane with a soft sigh.

Brad rubbed his head, breathing in shallow gasps. "Seriously? Why don't you just fuck on Pete's bo—"

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Shane snapped. He would have shot to his feet, but Ros had settled so comfortably against him that he didn't have the heart to let him go yet.

One way or another, this situation needed to be dealt with. Both Brad and Ros had his number, and he had no doubt whatsoever that the former would push him under the bus instead of pretending he had no idea where Pete had gotten the drugs from.

Sorting this out created least opportunities for a fuckup, so this was what needed to be done.

Ros sobbed but turned his face to Brad with a scowl. “You told me you were keeping an eye on his habit!”

Brad raised his hands as if he expected the universe to throw him a magic ball. “He wasn’t even supposed to be here! He told me he was going away for the weekend!”

“Does this change anything?” Shane growled and made a broad gesture toward the corpse. “If he’s found here, it will backfire on you one way or another. Which means that—” He stilled, watching Brad with expectation, but the idiot just stared back at him like a dead fish.

Shane had no time for this. “Which means he can’t be found here.”

Ros rubbed his eyes, but his breath only sped up again. “Are you saying we should move him? We’ll be even more fucked for tampering with a crime scene.”

Brad paced in front of the door. “I’m not going to prison over Pete being a stupidass junkie!”

Watching both the men thrash in panic was a bitter reminder of how far-removed Shane really was from their world. Ros might be a dirty boy in bed, he might earn cash on the side by dealing on a small scale, but at the end of the day he was a rabbit while Shane would always remain a wolf, and any association they might develop would always end in blood.

Still, he didn’t want to squash the fluffy critter between his teeth so soon into the game.

“If you don’t want to go to prison, get me some heavy-duty trash bags and tape.”

Brad stilled, and Shane could see understanding seeping into that jockface.

Ros was a bit slower on the uptake, eyes widening as if he’d just snorted coke. “You can’t be serious. Someone will find out,” he whispered, but there was a hint of question in his voice. He wasn’t defying Shane. He was seeking reassurance.

They’d been through a whirlwind of sex and emotion in the past few weeks, but for all Shane knew, Ros might not want to see him again after this, and if that was the case, his whole revenge plot would be null and void.

That was what he should worry about, not whether Ros would ever smile at him again.

“They won’t if we all keep our mouths shut,” Shane said, staring straight at Ros. Brad must have taken it as his cue and ran out, leaving Shane to deal with the corpse and a boy who now saw him for what he truly was. The curtain had fallen, and it was time to face the music, even though Shane would have paid taxes on his real income to keep basking in Ros’s admiration.

Ros tried to rise, but his knees gave up, and Shane ended up helping him to his feet.

“Are—are you sure this can work? Where will we take him? Have you—Have you done this before?” Ros glanced at him, pale as a ghost and just as shiny, though with sweat rather than some otherworldly glow.

Pete was far from Shane’s first dead body, but the grayish tint of Ros’s skin was making his stomach cramp. From now on, every time Ros looked at Shane, he’d think of maggots, and his frat brother’s dead eyes.

“It’s... a hard business.”

Ros took a deep breath, glancing to Pete’s limp form. “So it worked before? You managed not to get caught?” he whispered, but instead of disgust, there was hope in his voice.

The tension in Shane’s shoulders dispersed somewhat, and he nodded, wiping his sweaty hand on his jeans. Words pushed at his teeth, wanting out, but the door opened, and Brad tossed in a roll of black trash bags, and an untouched two-pack of tape.

He was out of breath as if he’d sprinted around the campus several times in a row.

“I’ll be the lookout,” he blurted out before disappearing behind the door.

“Coward,” muttered Shane.

Ros took a deep breath and tied his hair into a tight bun at the top of his head. “T-tell me what to do?” he asked but wouldn’t meet Shane’s gaze. He seemed like a house of cards about to collapse, yet there he was, pulling his sleeves up.

It was weirdly impressive.

“You want to help?” Shane asked before he could have considered shutting the fuck up.

Ros nodded with fresh determination. “It’s my fault too. You can’t be left to deal with this yourself,” he said and grabbed one of the green trash bags meant for garden waste.

Beck Junior was stepping up and taking responsibility. Did he carry even a drop of the old bastard’s blood?

Shane stared at him as disbelief ate at his stomach, but when Ros looked back, hesitant about approaching the corpse, it was time to move.

“Thanks. I didn’t expect that,” he muttered, kneeling next to the body and opening the package of tape.

“Just... sorry in advance if I throw up,” Ros said and actually laughed, but the tremble in his voice told the real story. Ros was on the verge of a breakdown, and it was up to Shane to guide him through this.

Which was a strange experience. In prison, life was about looking after yourself, and charity was not something Shane had been willing to offer anyone. Even back in the day, when Frank had given him a helping hand, the two of them were more of a team than anything else. Shane’s parents didn’t deserve a mention, as they didn’t have a caring bone in their bodies.

And there Ros was, so desperately in need of guidance Shane wanted to give. Ros reminded him of a puppy, which for some unknown reason had chosen Shane as his favorite no matter how intensely Shane had tried to treat the dogs as a way to kill time in prison. The little black lab which Shane had ended up naming Goofy had depended on him for training, food, and affection. Shane would often claim he didn’t care for it much, but he’d given Goofy all the love he hadn’t been free to express to any other living being, and taking care of the cute little buddy helped him get through prison with his sanity intact.

But it was easy to love creatures incapable of betrayal. A man, even one as sweet as Ros, would always think of himself first, and no matter how much emotion he stirred in Shane, he was not an innocent puppy. Sometimes it was a man’s own mind that told him the most elusive lies.

“Don’t throw up. It might lead the police to us,” he muttered and started his work by taping Pete’s wrists together, so his hands wouldn’t flop around.

Ros nodded with a beaten expression, but when prompted, he approached to help cover Pete's chest and head with the bag. "What will we do with him?"

Shane's lips dried, and he met the blue gaze. "If you lend me your car, I'll get him someplace where he won't be found."

"I'm not leaving you with this, Shane. We'll get through this together."

Was Ros trying to... reassure him? That had to be the cutest thing Shane had ever seen. Comparable only with Goofy barking at the rain as if that could save them both from getting wet.

And just like he'd never want Goofy to lose that sense of wonder, he'd do everything in his power to avoid further stains on Ros's conscience.

"Look, that's very noble of you, but I... you know, we're not the same. I'm more accustomed to this kind of stuff," he muttered as Ros's handsome, smiling face flashed through his memory.

"How so?" Ros asked, rolling the body over when prompted. Shane didn't miss the way his hands trembled. The agile fingers that had sculpted the girl's face in clay didn't belong in Shane's world of body disposal, yet here they were.

Shane itched to do this himself, or get Frank to come over and help him, but Ros's presence was so calming, he ended up shaking his head at his own thoughts. "I'm... I've just come out of prison. So I've seen things."

Ros's head bobbed up, eyes wide, and Shane recoiled in anticipation of judgement. "Oh. Y-you haven't said. Wh-when? What were you in for?"

"A few weeks ago," muttered Shane, gesturing for Ros to pull the limp body up so he could wrap the tape around Pete's arms. "And it doesn't matter what I was in for because I didn't do it."

Shane shouldn't have revealed this at a moment so tense, but maybe the conversation would at least distract Ros from the terrible task he chose to participate in out of an unexpected sense of duty. But when Rosen hadn't accused him of obscuring his murky past or gotten angry, a part of Shane wished to share a bit more. Maybe it was *him* who was the pup seeking approval?

"Oh no... That's horrendous. And you weren't able to fight the accusations in court?" Ros asked as they moved on to Pete's ankles.

It was such a naive question that Shane thought he was being mocked. But no, Ros stared at him with open sympathy, as if he didn't know that scum like Shane, people who didn't have the money to employ their own lawyer, and who had been raised on a diet of violence and mistrust, were never given a chance.

"No. A very important man framed me for something he'd done himself. He was left to get on with his life, and I rotted away. But he will pay for what he did," Shane growled, his vision going red as he took in Ros's face.

It was a shame the road to destroying Ed Beck led through this boy.

"Was prison... scary?" Ros asked, no doubt pondering his own future as they packed Pete's legs into a trash bag.

What kind of question was that even?

A fire kindled at the back of Shane's mind, and he ground his teeth to keep from barking. "You actually believe me?"

Ros blinked, opening his mouth. "Why would you lie to me? We're literally disposing of a body together."

The hot smoke was gradually spreading through Shane's veins, and he found it difficult to think with the fumes filling his skull. "People like you

don't believe people like me. Experience," he muttered, wrapping the tape around the limp ankles.

"Um... People like me? We're both drug dealers, and lovers. So yes, I do believe you, and I don't like what you're insinuating!"

As if that was their biggest problem right now.

Lovers. Rosen thought they were a real couple. He had no idea where this led, and that the man he'd chosen was just as rotten as Pete would be next week.

"We're not the same. If we got caught, I'd be right back in the can, and your daddy would have kept you safe."

Working together in silence was somehow much worse than the earlier spat, but when Shane spotted tears dripping down Ros's cheeks, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Look, if you'd rather wait outside, I can make Brad carry him with me, okay?" he muttered, shriveling on the inside. He should've been annoyed by this display of weakness, but instead fought guilt weighing him down like lead chains.

"No, I wouldn't rather!" Ros pierced Shane with a glare. "So maybe we're not the same, but that doesn't mean you can't trust me. You can talk to me about shit. I want to know you. But I guess if I don't mean anything to you, then you can tell me. I'll back off."

Shane stared. Looked down. Peaked up at Ros again, and still couldn't think of anything worth saying. He'd been working on seducing Ros for over two weeks, so why the hell had he dug himself into a hole now, when it had been going so well?

He'd grown to like this cute little puppy—that was why.

He was a moron.

His neck creaked when he rolled his head, increasingly tense from the smoke poisoning every cell in his body. “It’s not like that.”

Ros wiped the tears from his face with his forearm and took a deep breath. “Then think about what it *is* like. We need to get out of here with the body, so consider what you want to say, and we can talk in the car.” He didn’t look like someone who had his shit together, but at least he sounded as if he did.

Shane’s thoughts were a chaotic whirlwind, and no matter how hard he tried to focus on the task at hand, Ros’s presence was a reminder of all his past fuck-ups. Brad was pale as a sheet as the three of them used the cover of darkness and moved the body to the back of Rosen’s vehicle.

Shane should have never gotten into Ed Beck’s car and touched his steering wheel, which had made incriminating him so easy. He should have listened to Frank and fucked Ros over before they’d gone on countless date-like meetups. What should have been easy seduction had now become a flashing light at the back of his mind, constantly warning him of the disaster to come.

He got a strange sense of déjà vu when he sat in the driver’s seat of Ros’s car. He could smell the booze Ed Beck had drank that fateful night.

It wasn’t that Shane didn’t deserve prison time. He’d done shit even before he crossed paths with Ros’s father, but to lose ten years of his life for something he *didn’t* do—that he couldn’t stand.

“Are we gonna talk?” Ros asked when Shane started the engine, eager to get off campus as fast as possible.

“What about?” Shane asked in a grim tone before glancing to the back seat where the corpse was hidden under a comforter.

“How long were you in prison?”

That was a much easier question than any involving feelings, so Shane rolled his shoulders, staring at the road ahead. He'd never been a reckless driver, but one could never be too careful with a body or drugs in the car. "Ten years."

Ros gasped and grabbed his forearm. "Jesus! Shane."

Shane froze and squeezed the wheel, going frantic. But there was no one he could have hit. Not even a squirrel. "What...?"

"Ten *years*? And you only just got out a few weeks ago? Are you okay?"

What an odd question to ask.

"Of course I'm fine. I have a job at Frank's. I have some place to live, and I've never become a junkie. Pretty good outcome."

Ros shook his head and bumped it against the back of his seat. "Really? That's it? It doesn't bother you?"

"That's not what I said. Of course it bothers me! I lost my twenties locked away and always having to watch my back! When I got out and tried to use Grindr, a friend had to fucking help me, so yeah, it's not *nothing*. But that's what happens to people like me, and you just gotta adapt," he snapped, trying to even out his breathing as the air got thicker.

Ros's soft fingers slid down to Shane's hand. "I'm sorry."

Shane didn't know what to do with that kind of support. Frank had given him a pat on the back, put a beer in his hand, and helped him hook up, but what Ros offered felt more personal. Something none of Shane's friends could have given. And yet, Shane wasn't sure how to name it.

"It's... fine. There's nothing you can do. But it's nice to be around you. Like I haven't lost a decade of my life."

And despite being a wreck himself after tonight's events, Ros still flashed Shane a little smile and winked. "If it helps, I was eleven ten years

ago, so we wouldn't have been a match."

What had little Ros been up to the night his dad had fucked Shane over?

A strange mixture of anger and guilt flooded Shane's chest, but he squared his shoulders and bore it. "No."

They sat with that for a while, Ros's tired face illuminated by yellow street lights every now and then.

"Shane?" Ros finally asked. "Where are we going?"

Something deep inside Shane told him to leave Ros at the nearby motel, or lie, but the warm hand resting on his knee kept him from saying anything but the truth. He'd deal with the consequences later.

"Home."

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Chapter 8 – Ros

Ros wasn't sure anymore if he was stressed out of his mind or numb. His life took a turn tonight in a direction that he'd only seen in movies, and yet he was right in the middle of it. He'd handled a dead body, and he was on his way to dispose of it with his drug dealer boyfriend who'd spent the last ten years in prison.

Ros hadn't liked Pete as a person, but he'd never wished him dead. The whole situation felt like a bad dream, yet there he was, with his hand on Shane's thigh as they approached unknown territory with a corpse in the back of the car.

"Just let me talk. It'll be off your hands soon," Shane said, squeezing Ros's wrist as he drove the car down a narrow road through a woodland. The tree trunks standing guard on each side looked unpleasantly stark in the glow of the high-beam lights, and as shadows moved along with the vehicle, Ros couldn't help but reimagine them as demons creeping behind the trees to soon follow them to whatever hellhole they were headed to.

Home, Shane had said. They were going to the place where he lived.

"What will happen to... the body?" Ros asked, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Are you sure it's safe?"

He could only hope Shane knew what he was doing because he *was* Ros's lifeline. Nerves were getting the best of him, and he was once more finding it hard to breathe.

"There's a few options. But he won't be found," Shane said as he slowed upon approach to a road running parallel to a tall concrete wall.

"What is this place?"

Shane stiffened, but as he changed course and followed the wall, the tension in his thigh relaxed somewhat. "Do you really need to know?"

"I don't need to, but I want to. You live here?" Ros took a deep breath and glanced at Shane's handsome profile. He hadn't realized how little he knew about his boyfriend. He'd never asked about any particulars, but maybe Shane hadn't been willing to disclose parts of himself he was ashamed of? His standoffishness earlier betrayed that there was a deep ravine between him and Ros, so maybe he'd just been self-conscious about his past?

"Yeah. My friend, Frank, owns this place. And he took me in after I got out of prison."

"That's nice of him." Ros smiled nervously. "And he's aware of our... cargo?" If that was the case, then Frank surely wasn't a normal *nice* man.

Shane gave a shallow laugh as they approached a massive gate and stopped in front of it. "Not yet," Shane said and stepped out of the car. "You'll be doing the driving from now."

Ros followed him out so they could swap places. "Okay... but... he won't freak out?"

"Oh, he will be pissed off. But I'll deal with it," Shane said, approaching a panel at the side of the closed entrance, his dark silhouette only a shadow.

Ros hated staying alone, but he had to close the door to drive in once the gate opened for them. His dinner kept trying to crawl up his throat, but he'd not puked yet, so he'd hopefully manage to keep it down in front of Shane's unsavory buddies as well. At least he'd been told they were all gay, so he wouldn't have to stress over revealing who Shane was to him by accident. And if one of these guys had been Brad's contact for getting drugs, it was in their interest to help out in this terrible situation and avoid being implicated themselves.

He flinched when metal creaked, but it was just Shane pulling one wing of the gate wide open, and Ros collected himself enough to drive through.

So far, he hadn't paid much attention to what loomed on this side of the fence, but once the car came to life and illuminated the mountains of twisted metal and other junk piled on either side of a cracked asphalt road, his stomach tried to crawl up his gullet.

What if Shane intended to never let him leave?

Would he stand a chance in a fight with Shane? Impossible.

But Ros drove through like a good boy, and Shane hopped back into the passenger seat as soon as he locked the gate behind them. A sane person would have been terrified, but Ros was overcome by a strange sense of calm. The junk yard filled to the brim with mountains of crap like rusted cars and piles of old mattresses should've felt like a coffin, but it could also be his haven. Away from public roads, they wouldn't bump into cops, and Shane said the people here were his friends and would help. It would be fine. It would.

"I can see how someone could just vanish here," Ros said with a nervous chuckle. He could only hope *he* wasn't about to join Pete on the journey to nothingness.

Shane surveyed the piles of junk around them as if he were expecting an attack. “That’s the idea.”

“Is this... something you’ve done a lot of?” Ros asked, biting his lip and unable to look up at Shane, but from the corner of his eye he could see the powerful chest rising and falling faster.

Shane stalled, hesitating with his answer until Ros’s body hair bristled as if he were a rabbit that had just spotted a wolf. “But I never... killed anyone,” he said in a dull voice that seemed to hang in the air until neither of them could breathe properly.

Ros hadn’t known that this was the answer he needed. So maybe he was tumbling down the morality hill, but neither of them was a murderer at least. While Pete’s downfall had been his own, Ros didn’t think his conscience would allow him to make any more money on the stuff that killed the poor guy, even if he’d just have gotten it somewhere else otherwise.

“That’s good to know. Wait. What was that?” Ros flinched, because he could swear that a large shape had moved somewhere on the edge of his vision, right behind a wrecked car they’d passed.

“Stop the car,” Shane said, and opened the window on his side before sticking his head out. “It’s Shane! For fuck’s sake, go bother someone else!”

Ros heard a low growl that made his hair bristle, but then a raspy voice followed from the edge of darkness.

“Did you lock the gate?”

“Of course I did! I always lock the gate! I don’t need a fucking babysitter,” Shane said and pulled up the window with a deep scowl. He gestured at the road ahead. “Let’s go.”

“Who was that?” Ros asked as they drove on. “You have guards here?”

Shane grunted with displeasure and placed his hand on Ros’s thigh as they made their way between the massive piles of unwanted stuff. It only now hit Ros that he had no idea what the purpose of a junkyard was. Were they repurposing stuff and selling it on?

“Just this guy. Frank found him injured by a big cat and took him in. He’s not right in the head.”

“Oh. But not in, like, a dangerous way?” Ros asked, but could already see the glow of lights far off, beyond the mountains of trash.

“He runs around with a spear and a bow, so I wouldn’t venture too far away from the house on your own, if I were you,” Shane muttered, shifting in the seat as the junk hills opened into a flat valley with some vehicles and machines scattered around the edges and a bungalow sitting ahead, with a slope of rusty metal rising beyond it.

“Guess we’re not in Kansas anymore, eh?” Ros let out a nervous laugh, because what was he to say to that? *A spear*? Then again, who was he to judge what was normal when he’d arrived here with a dead body?

Shane snorted and glanced at him with a little smile that shouldn’t have gotten to Ros in their situation, yet absolutely had. So Shane wasn’t the greatest person in the universe, but maybe he’d just been dealt a bad hand and the questionable ways in which he’d advanced his situation had been the only available to him? What really counted was that his actions tonight had proved he was worthy of Ros’s trust, dependable and caring as a boyfriend should be.

“Very far from Kansas, but I’ll make sure you have a soft landing. Come on,” Shane said, getting out of the car as soon as it parked in front of a fence that most definitely did not belong here.

Someone had left a pot hanging on one of the pickets as if this was a cottagecore fever dream, not a desolated nightmare where people came to disappear.

Ros was grateful for the assurance though, and was quick to stand close to Shane once he left the car. “Thanks for... not leaving me with all this,” he said, unwilling to acknowledge the lump resting in the back seat. Shane’s arm slid up his back and settled on his shoulders. He nudged the little white gate with the tip of his boot and pulled Ros toward the porch, through a garden of dry weeds.

“Oh... that’s nothing. I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

Before he could even knock, a middle-aged man who could’ve compared in size with the bear they’d encountered in the woods appeared from behind the door. He wore several chains around his thick neck, with a whole variety of scrap hanging off them like trophies, and his fingers were adorned with enough signets to serve as an impromptu knuckle duster. He opened his mouth, but then his eyes settled on Ros and he closed it with a deepening frown. It felt like having the human equivalent of a tank point its gun at Ros.

“You stayin’ the night?” he asked, eying Ros from head to toe.

Shane’s fingers tightened on Ros’s shoulder. “This is Rosen. I told you about him.”

Frank’s broad nose wrinkled, but when he didn’t move, Shane went on, “There was a problem. Someone at the frat OD’d. He’s in the car.”

Ros slid his hand to Shane’s back and clenched his fingers on the jacket. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled even though Pete’s drug habit wasn’t his fault. He’d never pushed any pills at anyone, only helped provide what people already wanted, but he still felt numb, constantly under threat of a looming breakdown.

Frank spread his massive, tattooed arms. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

“What’s going on?” asked a male voice from inside, and seconds later a fluffy blond head peeked out from behind Frank’s shoulder.

“It is what it is, Frankie. Switch off the cameras outside, and we’ll be good to go,” Shane said, feeling sturdy like a tree capable of keeping Ros safe during the flash flood. “Are we doing this or not?”

Frank bared his teeth. “Fuck! I’m done with those frat boy motherfuckers if they can’t police their own!” He kicked the door frame, while the other guy’s brown gaze settled on Ros.

“I’m Dex.” He extended his hand in greeting even though he had to duck under Frank’s arm to pass in the doorway. He was on the shorter side, much younger than both his buddies, yet still more athletic than Ros, with freckles, dimple and nose piercings, as well as a whole collection of random tattoos covering most of the skin on show. In contrast to the sticker-like images on his chest and arms, Dex’s throat was the hyper-realistic mouth of a predator with two sets of razor-sharp teeth, which clamped down on its invisible victims each time he nodded. It was fucked up. But also kind of cool.

Frank reached forward and squeezed his massive paw on Shane’s arm, but his gaze met Ros’s. “I need to steal him for a moment.”

Shane grunted and rubbed Ros’s nape before sliding away and following Frank inside. “I’ll be right back. Don’t leave the house.”

“You sure you don’t need help with the... *thing*?” Ros asked.

But Shane just shook his head as he walked off with Frank.

Dex grinned at him and made a wide gesture with his arm, inviting Ros inside. The place was a bit bare, with no decoration in sight and dark smudges on the walls. A massive table was the main feature of the interior,

but instead of a centerpiece that would have occupied the middle in most homes Rosen had visited, it was crowded by dirty dishes tucked into spaces where junk and tiny metal cogs had been pushed aside to make room for food.

As Ros breathed in the odd aroma of burning chicken noodle soup, Dex followed him and closed the door. “You hungry? We just finished, but there’s some food left.” He wiggled his eyebrows and showed off a neon-pink and gold packet of instant noodles.

Ros sat down in a chair by the table with a deep sigh. “Nah, I think I lost my appetite forever.”

“You’ll get better once you stop stressing out about the guy being found,” Dex said, flinching when a dull thud came from the closed room Shane had disappeared into with Frank. Their eyes met, and Dex grinned, as if nothing had happened, and rubbed his black-and-white neck. “Something to drink then? We have tea, including green. And sodas. And Frank keeps plenty of beer in the fridge,” he said, approaching at a slow pace.

For someone dealing with drugs and body disposal, he sure was friendly, so Ros dared to smile. He needed all the support he could get. “Apparently, he wasn’t even supposed to be at the frat today. He told my friend he was leaving for the weekend, so maybe the dust will settle on this fast.”

Dex grabbed a beer from the fridge and nodded. “Sure. Exactly. These things have their way of sorting themselves out. No need to worry when I’m on the job.” He winked at Ros, only confusing him further, because Shane was the one handling everything in Ros’s stead.

“Maybe coffee would be better after all. I might still be driving tonight.”

“Are you sure? It’s already late. You should stay over,” Dex told him and stepped so close Ros sensed the guy’s sneaker touching the inner side of his foot. Dex smelled of instant ramen and a cologne worn by about half of the male population, but the confidence with which he carried himself stalled Ros’s brain for so long that he didn’t react until the door behind him opened.

“Dex. Step away or I’m gonna rearrange your bones,” Shane snapped, approaching them in quick strides. His face was dark, as if he’d been splashed with beetroot juice, and he shoved at Dex’s chest before his sudden appearance could have caused a reaction.

Dex raised his hands in a blatant parody of innocence. “What’s your problem? I was just offering a cup of coffee.”

“Sure you were. A cup of dick more like. This one’s mine, so keep your slippery hands away from him,” Shane growled, pulling Ros close with a firm tug on the arm.

Frank was massive in comparison to the other two men. Broad in the shoulders, tall, and his black hair had a fluffy texture that would have surely looked like a dark lion’s mane if he let it out of the braid. Yet now that he and Shane had sorted out their differences, he seemed cool as a cucumber.

“Boundaries, Dex. You don’t have to fuck every single guy you meet.”

Ros was eager to stroke Shane’s arm, just to make it clear where he belonged. “Yeah, I’m taken.”

Dex rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “I wasn’t gonna do nothing. Just admiring the view.” He winked at Ros despite Shane’s threats, which meant his self-control really was at rock-bottom. Had his hair been dark and flowing rather than short and bleached, Dex would have been similar to the boyish guys Rosen had been interested in before he’d met

Shane, but once he'd went *man*, the prospect of kissing a *boy*, even one as charming as Dex, no longer held much appeal.

Frank exhaled, rested his hands on his hips and watched Ros long enough to prompt the need to become one with Shane and hide inside him. He wasn't the type to say much with his mouth, but those dark eyes, shadowed by brows like grassy cliffs, expressed worries Ros didn't want to acknowledge.

"I'll take it from here. And if Dex is so eager for *action*, he can go clean up Rosen's car. Shane, you can take him back in my truck."

Dex sucked in air, but one look from Frank shut him up.

Ros swallowed, trying to organize his thoughts. "Thank you," he uttered, but Frank shook his head.

"It's not for you, boy. I've got a debt with Shane, and I will help him out even if he drops shit like this on my doorstep."

Shane exhaled and gave Frank a slap on the arm. "I'm grateful, man. Won't happen agai—"

"Do not say that," Frank grumbled, shaking his head as he walked past them like a bear too sated to pay attention to humans. Ros wasn't used to strangers handling his vehicle, but he had left the keys in the ignition, and the sense of relief of not having to be in the same place as Pete's body made him melt against Shane.

He shut his eyes, calmly breathing in the sharp scent of Shane's sweat, but once the door shut, and two pairs of boots banged against the steps outside, he glanced up to see his lover watching him.

"Done."

"Then why do I have a feeling like it will haunt me forever?" Ros slid his fingers into Shane's hand nevertheless.

“It won’t,” Shane said with such certainty Ros felt both reassured and scared. Because what would it have meant if he stopped caring about the way Pete disappeared from the face of the earth? His family would look for him. They’d despair and long to know what happened to him.

But they would never find out, because refusing them closure kept Rosen out of jail.

Ros bit his lip as they approached a beat-up truck in a washed-out shade of red. “I guess I thought I was a better person than I actually am.”

“What? Why?” Shane asked, following him in the darkness while Frank and Dex argued about something by Ros’s car.

Ros climbed into the cab, trying to keep his shoulders from slumping. “Because I’m covering my own ass instead of going to the cops.”

“So? What good would it do if this messed up your life?” Shane asked and rolled into the seat before taking off the air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror. He tossed it behind his back, where it dropped to the floor. “Do you smell this? Pumpkin Spice. Dex must have put it in here!”

Ros snorted in disbelief. Pete was dead, his body soon to be gone off the face of the earth, and here they were, complaining about air freshener. It couldn’t get more surreal than this.

“Why? Is that his thing?”

“No, but Frank hates air fresheners. Dex could have gotten it as a thank you for a BJ, or whatever,” Shane said and started the truck, pressing on the gas pedal almost too hard.

Silence settled on the surprisingly clean cab for a while as they moved away from the warm light of the house and back into darkness.

“Did he hit on you too?” Ros asked.

Shane snorted. "I've yet to meet a man Dex doesn't hit on. But he's Frank's nephew, so I'm banned from fucking him anyway," he said, driving back down the winding road.

"How... um, I'm guessing you weren't celibate in prison?" Shane not having a normal life for the past ten years was still a fresh thought in his head, and the scope of what it meant kept eluding Ros.

Shane's shoulders dropped. "No. What do you want to know?"

"I don't want to pry." Ros rubbed his face, confused and overwhelmed with tonight's revelations.

Shane sighed. "I mean... it was what it was. But I've got a clean bill of health, yeah?" He glanced Ros's way, and must have been going too fast, because the next curve of the road had them both resisting the pull of gravity.

"Thanks, that's good to know," Ros said even if there were so many other questions he wanted to ask. Nothing felt appropriate, and instead of moving on, his thoughts kept circling Shane's time in prison with more determination, sending him into a dark spiral where all he could do was ponder a future in which Pete's body had been found and used as evidence to put him behind bars for life.

By the time they stopped in front of the gate again, he was glad for a chance to get out and breathe cool air.

Shane opened the passage, but Ros couldn't force himself back into the truck, and leaned against it, struggling to steady his increasingly frantic inhales. Just as he'd thought he had his life under control, his body chose to betray him again.

"Drive through, Ros," Shane said from a few feet away.

Ros lifted his hand to signal that he'd heard him and managed to speak despite every word feeling like barbed wire in his throat. Driving out

of the junkyard would mean facing the real world again and Ros didn't want to leave the safety of this artificial world of metal, plastic, and rubber yet.

"J-just gimme a minute."

Shane stilled, but then approached him in a couple of fast steps. "What is it?" he asked, placing his hand on Ros's back. In the dark, away from anyone who could have seen them, the touch felt almost too hot, and Ros pressed his face to the side of the truck, looking for relief.

"I don't wanna go to prison," he choked out, surprised by the sob that came out of him right after. "I'm not usually such a whiny baby," he added, but couldn't hold in another sob as his eyes dampened uncontrollably.

"You're not going to. There's no body. As long as you and Brad keep this quiet, you'll be fine," Shane said, rubbing his palm up and down Ros's back in soothing circles.

Ros wrapped his arms around Shane's neck and hugged him, still struggling for breath. He'd never been such a mess, but then again, no night in his life had involved such extreme fear.

"Thank you for being there. I don't know what I would have done without you." He kissed Shane's ear, his jaw, his neck, driven by the growing need to express how much Shane meant to him.

Shane remained still, like a bronze statue that had been standing in the sun all day and was now exuding heat to banish all of Ros's fears. "It's nothing."

"That's not true," Ros whispered against his neck and slid his hands down Shane's sides, to rest them on his hips. "It feels like I've known you so much longer. I need you to understand you can depend on me too."

“Yeah?” Shane’s breath was sweet on his face when they looked at one another, and his big hands left a burning trail wherever they touched. Ros’s eyes fluttered shut as Shane rolled him against the truck until Ros’s back was flat against its metal body.

The stars gave very little illumination, but the glow of the truck lights was as comforting as a warm blanket on a cold, cold night.

Ros’s throat felt tight when he stared into Shane’s eyes in the dark and pulled his hand to the middle of his chest. “Yes, I’ll keep all your secrets here.”

The thick, calloused fingers twitched. And then Shane’s mouth was on Ros’s, hips rolling against his, arms surrounding him like vines.

“What are you doing to me, boy?” Shane whispered in a soft rasp.

“Trapping you, of course.”

Ros couldn’t help himself and rocked against Shane. The little moan he uttered surprised even him, but after the terrible events of tonight, he was just desperate to become one with Shane and let passion take away his troubles. Shane had opened up in a whole new way, and that felt as if an invisible wall separating them had crumbled.

Shane gasped into his lips and pushed his hand under Ros’s clothes, rubbing warm, bare skin. His touch was like fire, and when nails raked down Ros’s stomach, he threw his head back, all worries forgotten in the frenzy of Shane’s kisses. The muscular thigh pushed his apart, rising to press at his groin, and in the darkness of the remote junkyard, Ros hung on to his lover, letting the storm take over.

“I need you inside me,” he whispered breathlessly, but something was off the moment he voiced his desire. “What’s that sound?” Alarmed, he glanced over Shane’s shoulder, where the repetitive slapping came from.

Shane blinked, but his face twisted as he turned toward the faint glow of the moon. The noise became even more pervasive, and it was only when Shane pulled away that Ros noticed a crouching form perched on the roof of an old truck on the other side of the road.

Ros's eyes went wide. "Is that—?"

Shane pulled away with a scowl. "Are you fucking kidding me? Get a TV if you want porn!"

Before Ros knew it, Shane turned around and charged that way, grabbing an old microwave from the ground.

The figure dashed off the roof, rolling into the truck's bed. It managed to evade the microwave Shane threw at him by a margin. Instead of yelling anything back, the man hissed and growled at them, backing away to where Ros couldn't see him anymore.

"See what I have to deal with?" Shane snapped, storming Ros's way. They were once again close, but the desire that had burned so strongly moments ago had fizzled away.

Shane groaned, rubbing his forehead against Ros's shoulder. "I'll take you home. Or we can stop at a diner or... something."

Ros stared into the darkness, still too shocked to move. "What a pervert! Is that normal?"

Shane shook his head. No. It's definitely not normal. He's a horny fuck who doesn't understand boundaries."

"What's his name? Does he, like, have a crush on you?" Ros pushed himself into motion and climbed into the driver's seat so they could be behind the gate and out of sight. At least the crazy encounter helped him to breathe again.

Shane harrumphed, fishing out his keys. "His name's Jag, and I sure fucking hope he doesn't like me that way. But if he ever fucking jerks off to

my Ros, this shit will get personal!” Shane hollered on the way to the gate, but considering that he took his time to open the window, the words were meant for the intruder. Still, it warmed Rosen’s heart that he cared.

My Ros.

He did like the sound of that.

Shane sat behind the wheel once he locked the gate behind them, and grabbed Ros’s hand as soon as they were off. This might have been the worst night of Ros’s life, but having the support of this man, who not long ago had been a perfect stranger, made the burden of lies and death easier to carry. Maybe Shane was right and time would blur the bad memories, leaving Ros’s heart, if not clean, then at least light?

His mind drifted off as he watched darkness disperse in the headlights. Leaving Pete’s body behind allowed Ros to think about the future again.

“Do you want to live with Frank for the long haul?” Ros asked, stroking Shane with his thumb.

Shane licked his lips, but kept his eyes on the road. “Why?”

“Just wondering what your plan is. When I finish college, I’ll have to look for a place of my own, since I’ll want to come out, and then my dad won’t support me anymore.”

Ros’s skin went aflame when he realized how clingy this question was. He wasn’t even in his final year and had no reason to plan their future years in advance, yet here he was—suggesting that a guy he’d dated for only a handful of weeks moved in with him in the future. His throat felt blocked, but Shane spoke before Ros could have.

“What are you—”

Something large emerged from the darkness ahead and froze in the middle of the road as the headlights made its eyes shine with a golden hue.

“Look out!” Ross yelled, and Shane hit the brakes.

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Chapter 9 – Shane

Shane flattened the brake, but as the truck came to a halt, jolting both him and Ros at the dashboard, the front of the vehicle still hit something.

He didn't want to think about what it was.

Itching to pretend it never happened and just drive on, Shane stalled with his hands squeezing the steering wheel, but life had taught him that freezing in the face of danger meant pain, so he snapped out of it fast. He slid out of the cab, grabbing onto the open door when his head spun. The sickly glow of the headlights cast shadows on the murder scene, and he froze, thrust back into the moment that had changed his life forever.

Ed Beck speeding down an empty road, his brain sluggish with whisky, and the person foolishly stepping into his path. Had she tried to kill herself? Anyone would have seen or heard the approaching car in a place so remote, but for some inexplicable reason, the mom of three walked right under the wheels. He could see it now: her body flying up and rolling over the limo's roof like a rag doll, Ed Beck freezing behind the wheel, only to choose the number of a man who dealt with career-ending situations like this one.

Shane's breath became shallow. His skin beaded with sweat, and despite knowing whoever had been hit by the truck needed help, he couldn't

make himself take another step.

He barely registered that Ros had left the truck until the boy's shadow licked the asphalt at the front of the vehicle.

"Oh God... You poor thing," Ros cooed and stepped within Shane's sight before going down to his knees. "He's still alive, Shane! What's a dog doing in the woods on its own?"

A part of Shane had feared that if he hurried to the front of the truck, he'd see the woman Beck had killed, the woman the court had decided *he* had killed. He still had her image at the back of his head, embellished over the years with details he couldn't have noticed on that fateful night. The pattern on her T-shirt. The exact position of broken limbs. Dead eyes watching him in accusation despite the deep shadow cast on her face.

But tonight's victim let out a prolonged whine, kickstarting Shane's stiff legs. Nauseated, he stepped from behind the truck and saw Ros kneeling over a trembling body covered by sleek black fur.

The dog was on the large side, some kind of pit bull mix from the look of him, but it didn't attempt to get up and just lay helplessly with one of his legs bent out of shape.

Ros murmured something as he reached for the animal. "It's okay, boy, we'll take care of you."

"Don't! He could bite you," Shane said, dashing to his knees as the poor mutt attempted to drag itself up with a prolonged, desperate whine. Its hind leg, where Shane must have hit it was broken, but that wasn't the only injury Shane could spot in the cool glow of the truck's headlights. One of its ears had been torn off and the edge was still one big scab, and a yellow cord was tied around its neck so tightly, it had cut into skin and now agitated raw flesh. Someone must have abandoned the unfortunate dog somewhere in the woods, and left it to die.

What kind of monster could have done something like that?

Ros pulled away, pale as a sheet. "But we have to help him..."

A glance at the dog's underbelly confirmed that it was a male. "I know... I just... it's better if he bites *me*," Shane mumbled, gently keeping the dog down with one hand. Its eyes were wide, frantic, but he hadn't shown his teeth yet. "Fuck..."

Ros looked up at him, keeping his distance, as Shane had requested. "It's not your fault. It was dark, and he came out of nowhere." The gentle fingers stroking his back, reminded him of how damp his T-shirt had gotten within the span of the two minutes that had passed since the accident.

Shane's throat felt tight, and his fingers shook as the mutt opened its mouth and licked his fingers before shaking as if the cold had only just gotten to him. "But... he might die."

"He's not dead yet, okay?" Ros said with a deep breath. "I saw a blanket in the back. Let's put him on it and take him to the vet."

Shane stalled, the pulsing at the base of his throat so fast he could barely stand it. But this was a solution. "Yeah. Get it," he muttered before staring at the poor dog again and gently petting its muddy flank.

Ros rushed off, but the dog never looked away, its shiny eyes begging Shane for help. He was far skinnier than he should be, with ribs stretching the skin on his side, and it occurred to Shane that the dog must have hurried toward the car in hope of seeing his master return.

If he got his hands on the bastard who treated the sweet thing like this

"Shh, it'll be okay. We'll take you to a doctor," he muttered, shuddering in disgust when a maggot crawled out of the wound on the animal's neck.

Ros ran back with the blanket, his hand passing through the short hair on Shane's head. "Let's do this, I'll pick up his back."

"His leg's broken," Shane said as if it wasn't obvious, but Ros didn't respond and spread the blanket so they could wrap it around the injured animal with ease. They picked up the impromptu stretcher and stepped toward the car when it occurred to Shane that he had no idea whether there was someplace to take an injured animal so late. "And... where do we go? Is there like an... ER for dogs?"

Ros looked up from his phone, furiously typing with his free hand. "Already on it."

*

The veterinary hospital was one of the last places Shane expected to find himself at in the middle of the night. Yet here he was, tucked into the corner alongside Ros, and waiting to find out more about the state of the mistreated dog they'd accidentally hit. All on the very evening when they'd disposed of a body together.

"You said you wanted a dog. Maybe it's destiny?" Ros poked him with his foot with a hint of smile even though there were bags under the eyes. He was usually more restrained with teasing touches, but there was no one at the reception desk at the moment, and not a soul—animal or human—would notice their affection or overhear them.

Shane grunted, leaning forward with elbows resting on his spread thighs. The interior was white, decorated only with a couple of pet nutrition posters and a board with thank-you notes from grateful owners. This wasn't the kind of place he was familiar with. His life had always been full of grime, and even though this clinic was meant to treat animals and was in no

way fancy, its pristine floors and the flowers standing in a vase at the reception were just two signs that he didn't belong here.

"I don't know. It's happening too fast. I don't even have a place to keep a dog right now."

"I mean, there's a lot of space to roam at the junkyard, and Frank even has a fence around the house." Ros put his arm around Shane's back, tickling him with his fingertips. "You did say you had some experience training dogs."

Shane shrugged. "I guess."

"Or was it a lie? Because you did tell me you spent so much time in prison—"

"Oh, so you think I'm a liar?" Shane asked, squeezing his hands together as the accusation stabbed its way under his skin. His plans for revenge were over if Ros couldn't trust him anymore. A part of him would have been glad. But the other, the vicious and vengeful side of Shane, knew he should have never gotten so close to the boy in the first place. How was some shithead overdosing at the frat Shane's problem? He should have let things take their course instead of revealing so much of himself to a boy he'd intended to use as a tool against his father. Too late for regrets.

"No. That's not what I meant. I get why you were uncomfortable telling me about your time in prison. I just... don't know what to think anymore." Ros sighed but didn't take his hand from Shane's back, stroking him as if Shane was some marshmallow that needed soothing. After a damn decade behind bars, his soul was as hard as steel, and no bone in his body remained weak.

He didn't need reassurance. But if Rosen wanted to offer support, then maybe telling him something about the last ten years of Shane's life

could repair the damage caused by this stupid fucking evening and reassure him that Shane was still worthy of his trust?

Shane counted to ten and leaned back against the wall, staring at the black and white photo of a cat and dog sleeping together hung above the empty reception desk. “I was in a program for inmates. We trained dogs for disabled people.”

Ros’s eyes brightened. “That’s amazing! How long did you do that for??”

Shane exhaled, and the painful cramps in his shoulders unwound somewhat. “The past four years. Life got much better once I started, since prison’s... well, you feel aimless while you’re in there. No one thrives in a cage.”

“Was it hard for you? Or were you such a tough guy already in your younger days?” Ros nudged him with an elbow. No matter how much Shane wanted to harden and only act as if the teasing worked on him, it most definitely did. Ros was so cute it was impossible not to notice. Like a Disney Princess, he was sweet, and wished everyone well, and if he started singing in the woods, birds and rodents would flock to him as if he were made of grain.

Shane shouldn’t have liked it. But he did.

He just couldn’t understand what a guy *like that* saw in him.

“It’s hard in there even when you’re tough. Unless you’re one of those people who just don’t care what happens to them, you want to be somewhere else.” Shane closed his eyes, remembering the cell that he shared with a guy he loathed, and the constant stink of the toilet.

He couldn’t believe it had only been a couple of weeks since he’d returned to real life. It was like being brought back from the dead.

Ros bumped his shoulder against Shane's. "Does that scar on your back come from that time?"

"Got shived in my second year in there. Argued with the wrong guy, you know. I thought we've resolved things, but then he attacked me out of nowhere sometime later," Shane said, rubbing his hands, because his skin felt oddly cold all of a sudden.

"That must have been so hard. To always have to watch your back." Ros kissed his arm, and the softness of the gesture made Shane melt. He never thought he'd have access to a guy like this, let alone be the object of his affection. It felt undeserved, and the growing worry tightened the skin around his limbs.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"What?"

"You know what," Shane snapped, rising to his feet, because the warmth of Ros's body suddenly felt oppressive.

Silence extended between them for a while, and Ros ended up hanging his head with a sigh. "I'm still processing it all, but it's not like I deserve a gold star from society. Especially not after tonight. I just want to understand you better and be there for you. Is that so strange?"

It was for Shane. In his experience, people who acted all nice always had ulterior motives. It was why *he'd* gotten together with Ros in the first place.

So maybe this boy was naive in ways Shane couldn't fathom, but did that mean he could be trusted? His behavior was far beyond Shane's understanding. "I don't know. I've never met anyone like you."

"I thought that you'd trust me, considering everything we've gone through."

The sweet thing didn't even know that he should be the one to be wary of Shane, not the other way around. Rosen watched him with a soft expression, like a puppy unsure whether it was about to be petted or struck.

"It's... dangerous to trust people. That's what I've learned since I was this fucking little," Shane said reaching down as far as he could without actually bending over.

Rosen's mouth stretched into a smile, and he winked. "Is this a life lesson? Are you trying to tell me I should assume everything you say is a lie?"

Yes. You should. You definitely should.

The question left Shane stunned.

He'd gotten attached to the boy, and while the brief relationship he'd started with cruel intentions would end in tears one way or another, he couldn't bring himself to protect Rosen by pushing him away.

Worse yet, he was no longer sure whether he wanted to go through with his revenge plan either.

When had he gotten so soft?

"I'm not a good guy. I've seen some terrible shit. Even my own parents didn't want to keep me, so why—"

Ros got up and hugged him, pushing his pretty face into the folds of Shane's T-shirt. "You've been amazing to me. You matter *to me*. My heart's never pounded so hard and fast. For anyone. All I want is to cuddle, feed you cake, and then fuck your brains out. I can't explain why, but I don't really want to overthink it."

Shane's exhale trembled, and despite initial hesitation, he slid his arms around Ros and rested his chin on the top of his fluffy head. His chest felt weird, as if his heart were about to die and was frantically trying to

knock its way out through bone, but he ignored it and smelled Rosen's hair. "You remind me of Goofy, this puppy I trained just before getting out."

"What was he like? Was he a good student?"

Shane snorted. "Yeah. And didn't treat me any different than he did the lady who supervised us. He slept by my bed and was always so happy to see me."

"That does sound like me." Ros sniggered and kissed Shane's jaw. "You're gonna keep the dog if he survives, won't you?"

Shane stilled. He already knew it would cost a lot of money to get the critter back into shape, but to keep him? Care for him as if he were Shane's own? It was a commitment that he wasn't sure he was ready for.

"I haven't decided," he said, wanting to leave himself a way out.

"We could call him Cerberus, and he'd be guarding your lair."

Since when was it *their* dog?

Heat shot to Shane's head, rendering him speechless for several seconds. "My lair?"

"You know, at the junkyard. Cerberus belonged to the god of the underworld, Hades, and after tonight, I'm pretty sure we're both going to Hell. We'll need all the help we can get."

Shane might've known who Ros was speaking of, based on a Disney movie he'd seen as a kid, but he chose to make sure. "The gray guy who hated Hercules?"

Ros laughed and kissed him. "Exactly. He fell in love with the goddess of Spring, Persephone, and stole her away from the life she knew."

This sounded dangerously close to real life, but Shane still asked, "And that makes you... her?"

"I suppose so." Ros looked at him with so much affection Shane felt like a speck of dirt, undeserving of this beautiful, good-hearted creature.

“There was a rule in myths about having to come back to a place if you ate anything from there, and so she ate some pomegranate to give herself that option. I guess I’m doomed to always come back to you, because I’ve willingly tasted you and liked every bit of it.”

Shane felt hot. Then cold. Then hot again.

He pulled at the front of Ros’s T-shirt and kissed him, leaning close as strange sensations danced all over his body, driving away every bad thought.

Screw it.

He’d find a different way to get back at Ed Beck, but he would let Rosen cherish him and give the same back.

And he’d get the goddamn dog.

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Chapter 10 – Shane

Shane never particularly liked Thanksgiving. For him, it was the holiday of eating a whole supermarket pie on his own after breaking into a house that had been left empty for the holiday. A friend's family had invited him once, and that had been a fantastic night until Shane had been caught helping himself to some precious family heirloom he didn't even remember anymore.

He and Frank had only spent one fall in each other's company. Back then, his friend hadn't been big on celebrating, but now that his nephew stayed with them, Frank's big bear heart longed for a massive meal and a fun time for everyone. Despite laughing at him openly, Shane did look forward to the prospect of having special food with friends. Even if he'd be forced to endure a whole evening with Jag at the table.

Then again, he doubted the crazy bastard would stay that long.

And maybe he could convince one more person to stay with them?

Shane knocked on Ros's door. He hadn't been a regular at the frat, but after the fateful night almost two weeks ago, Brad had instructed all his frat bros to stay out of Shane's business and make him feel welcome.

The atmosphere had been somber in the past few days, since Pete's disappearance affected the overall mood at the campus. And with almost

everyone leaving for Thanksgiving, the chances of bumping into anyone at the frat were pretty slim. Shane had passed one family picking up their kid on the way into the house, but that was that. The emptiness of corridors that were always bustling with life was a reminder that normal people did care about their fellow student going missing. Not that Shane cared, but *Ros* was still feeling guilty over what had happened.

At least Cerberus was lifting everyone's spirits with a quick recovery, and Ros often visited the veterinary clinic to see him. The mutt was kinda cute, and as resilient as Shane. They would make a good team, and now that Shane had decided to take the dog in, he was even in the process of choosing a car, because he couldn't take his new pet on a bike ride.

"Come in!" Ros yelled from inside.

Shane entered, and while his gaze was instantly drawn to the large backpack resting against the desk, once he spotted Ros on the windowsill, with hair pulled up into a messy bun and a book in his lap, his heart might have stopped for a moment, no matter how little he cared for reading. Ros wasn't wearing pants with his T-shirt, and the late afternoon sun transformed the hair on his calves into little flames.

Shane almost forgot why he'd come here in the first place. "Hey."

"Shane!" Ros's smile was brighter than the sun behind him, and he put down the book to rush over. He wrapped his arms around Shane's neck and kissed him. His lips tasted of the experimental toothpaste he'd been trying—raspberry and mint.

Shane loved its flavor.

He wrapped his arms around Ros's wiry form and lifted him up, overcome by a sense of weightless relief that came with holding him again after a whole day apart. "How are you doing?" Shane asked, his hands already gravitating to their favorite place—Ros's ass.

“I’ve just finished packing. I spilled water over my jeans so I’m drying them before I go.” Ros laughed and pointed to the pants draped over the radiator.

“Won’t you miss me?” he teased, pinching Ros’s ass.

He was here to set a new plan in motion, and one of the cogs in it was luring Ros away from his cushy life. Thread by thread, he’d be pulling the rug from under Ed Beck’s feet and turning his son against him while luxuriating in the attention of the pretty boy. Win-win.

Ros snorted and kissed him again. “Of course I’ll miss you. And my dad’s new wife is a pain in the ass, but it is what it is, he wants me to come. I’ll be back in no time. Want me to bring you a turkey sandwich?”

An undercurrent of anger ran through Shane as he smiled back. He moved his fingers up Ros’s neck, and finally settled them on his cheeks, looking straight into the bright blue eyes. “What if you stayed with me instead?”

“I mean, that would be pretty fantastic. We probably wouldn’t have to even sneak around much, because everyone’s gone, but I can’t. Dad’s got some grand photoshoot planned with flags and shit. I wish I could bring you and see the look on his face.” Ros grinned as if the concept was a joke.

Shane stilled. “You could,” came out of his mouth before he could have stopped himself.

Ros rolled his eyes. “Yeah, cause that’s gonna work. ‘Hey, Dad, I know I wasn’t supposed to do any gay stuff at college, but Shane fucks me so good I just had to make him my boyfriend’?”

“I could be a friend who doesn’t have anyone to celebrate with. Wouldn’t a godly man like your dad want to play the Good Samaritan to a lost soul like me?” Shane teased with more conviction. That scenario would have ended in disaster once Beck Senior realized whom his son had

befriended, but it would not reveal the one secret Ros was so desperate to keep—his sexuality.

Some might have called Shane's actions manipulative. He'd rather have said they were the perfect middle ground between keeping the boy's livelihood safe and Shane getting under Ed Beck's skin.

Ros bit his lip and seemed to actually ponder it, which in turn made Shane realize he hadn't really expected that. "I mean... we do have a big house."

Shane's smile widened, and he moved his hands down the slender body, rubbing it in gentle circles until he found bare skin, just below Ros's underwear. Ed Beck wouldn't dare reveal who Shane was, but he'd spend the whole evening sweating bullets, and then sleep with one eye open.

And Shane? He'd get to fuck pretty young Rosen right under his father's roof.

"Yeah?"

Ros stared up at the ceiling with a deep sigh. "No, sorry, Shane, it's a pipe dream. Too risky."

He was right. He was absolutely right in worrying they might end up being discovered, but the other unspoken truth was that Ed Beck would question why his son chose the company of a lowlife like Shane. Ros might not realize that his lover and father shared a dirty secret from the past, but as much as he enjoyed his time with Shane, he'd be embarrassed to introduce him to his parents. Of course.

"Hm."

Ros groaned and pulled Shane to his small bed. "I know. It sucks. But I'm sure you'll have a good time with Jag," he teased. "Maybe he'll even wear a suit?"

“I’d rather have a good time with you. Even if Jag was also there,” Shane tried again, squeezing his hand on Rosen’s as annoyance fizzled inside his skull. He’d come here so certain of success that he hadn’t planned how he’d deal with rejection. What the hell had he been thinking? So they fucked and had a good time together. It didn’t mean that Rosen would ditch his lavish lifestyle for him, even for a couple of days. He cared about his daddy’s money and approval far more than he did for everything Shane was willing to offer him.

“Maybe I’ll manage to come back a day early and visit you then, hm?” Ros kissed him as if he hoped that could make Shane forget that he wasn’t wanted. All the negativity bubbled up in Shane like tar as they settled on the bed together.

The bitterness that had sat in Shane’s heart for so many years was now spreading through him, and it must have affected even his sight, because the handsome face in front of him seemed to hold a mean smile, with mocking words waiting at the tip of Ros’s tongue.

“Maybe,” he muttered.

He kept thinking of Ros as a pup but maybe *he* was the old dog, kicked too many times, yet still licking at every scrap of affection to the point of forgetting why he’d chosen not to trick Rosen into making that sex tape. He wanted to give their relationship a chance but resented himself for being so needy.

“Don’t be upset,” Ros said and, as if knowing exactly how to appease Shane, straddled his lap. He even pulled all his lovely hair out of the bun, because he damn well knew how much Shane liked to play with it. “I didn’t know it meant so much to you. No matter what, I’ll make sure we can spend Christmas together, okay?”

Yeah. Until Daddy comes up with a cool trip to Aspen, or Hawaii, or some other fancy place like that.

Shane wasn't disappointed. He'd been through too much to hope for things he couldn't get. That choking feeling in his throat? It was anger.

"Fine. I get it. It's not gonna be as nice at Frank's."

Ros rolled his eyes but still slid his hand up and down Shane's back. "You think I really want to pose for his stupid photos and pretend we're an upstanding family? I'll be back in no time, my Hades," he teased and nipped on Shane's ear.

A callback to the conversation about Persephone. Did it turn Ros on that a guy like Shane, with no prospects for the future, from the underbelly of this town, wanted him so much? Was this what the comparison was about?

"Then you need to give me something to remember you by."

"I can think of something," Ros whispered, kissing down Shane's neck and rocking on top of him already. The boy was so insatiable it would have been so easy to talk him into making an illicit recording. It didn't need to be released to the whole world. Maybe it would be enough if Ed Beck saw his only son in a compromising position?

"Hm? Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he teased and pulled out his cell phone.

Ros glanced to the phone, still stroking Shane's shoulders. "I'm thinking I'll leave you a nice load of cream. What are *you* thinking? You wanna look up some new position?"

His eyes were so blue, his mouth—so very smooth in comparison to the stubble around it. Shane almost forgot his purpose again, but he leaned back when Ros tried to kiss him and showed him the phone. "Maybe you

could suck some cream out of me while I film a little souvenir for our time apart?”

Ros’s cheeks flushed so fast it was as if someone spilled raspberry juice all over them. “Oh. I... It *sounds* hot, but these things have a way of finding themselves in the wrong hands, Shane. Didn’t you tell me just last week that you didn’t know what The Cloud was?”

Being spied on by a massive network was the last thing Shane needed, so Ros had switched off the automatic saving option for him. Or had he just pretended to? “Yeah, and it’s off now. I’m the only one who’s gonna see it.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t really feel so comfortable with it. I would keep stressing over my dad finding it one day.”

So Shane had helped him dispose of a body, and Ros still didn’t trust him.

Maybe he just had good instincts. Or maybe he anticipated a man like Shane going after his money in the future and didn’t want to create any blackmail material?

“Are you worried what I might do with it?”

Ros shook his head. “Why do you have to twist my words? We never talked about this before, and I’m leaving soon anyway. Maybe another time.”

“You just didn’t make any room in your plans for me,” Shane snapped back.

Ros slipped away from him, cutting short hopes for at least some physical satisfaction. “You didn’t tell me you wanted to plan for Thanksgiving together, did you?”

Shane spread his arms and shot to his feet. “I thought you’d be happy to see me! I thought you’d rather be with me than with the dad you always

complain about!”

Ros grabbed his jeans off the radiator even though they still seemed damp on the thigh. “Do you have any idea how expensive this college is? I’d never be able to afford it on my own, even if I still sold drugs. Which I don’t, cause I’m freaked the fuck out!”

“Oh yeah, there’s that. You were perfectly fine with letting me get rid of the corpse but you won’t give me a little memento for the holidays! Why? People do it all the freaking time!”

Ros pulled his jeans on and squared his shoulders. “You wanna tell me you’re still in the mood after this? Go on then, unzip.”

Shane stalled, squeezing his phone like a weapon. Something dangerous flashed in Ros’s eyes, and he feared he might find himself with bite marks where he was most vulnerable. “Uh—”

“What? Now you *don’t* want to get head?” Ros asked with a sneer and stepped closer.

Shane’s body hair bristled, and it took all of his willpower not to step away. “You’re being fucking weird.”

Out of nowhere, Ros shoved at Shane’s chest. “No, *you’re* being fucking weird. What is up with you today? Why would you keep pushing like that?”

Shane didn’t think. He grabbed Ros’s arm, spun him around, and flattened him against the wall with the arm twisted at the back. Blots of color swirled in front of him like phantom fireflies, but the sense of danger remained present in his body as his blood bubbled with adrenaline.

A shove was disrespect.

Disrespect could get you shanked or fucked.

Ros gasped, but then seemed to stop breathing altogether despite the furious pulsing in his wrist. “Um... I’m sorry,” he choked out after a long

pause, frozen against the wall.

Shane's brain was on fire. There was a part of him that wanted to shove down Ros's pants and show him that he wasn't the one in charge. But Ros didn't fight him and stilled like a doe caught in the headlights.

Shane's mouth dried as he breathed in the scent of fear already beading on Ros's skin, but when the slim body stiffened further, Shane let him go and took a big step back, unexpectedly shaken.

Why the hell did he feel so disgusting?

Ros turned against the wall, but his gaze remained lowered. Shane watched his mouth quiver, as if he were gathering the courage to say something, but then a beeping cut through the silence, and Ros pulled his phone out.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. My dad's had the fantastic idea of coming over to pick me up. He's downstairs. Just wait here, I'll be back as soon as I can."

Shane stood still. He balled his hands into fists when they trembled and remained in place as Ros dashed past him, making sure their skin wouldn't accidentally touch. It was only when the door slammed that Shane awoke from his stupor.

Ed Beck hadn't come, had he? Ros just used it as an excuse to run, and he'd be back with some of his frat brothers, or security, and have him thrown out.

What the fuck was wrong with Shane today?

Sometimes he forgot he couldn't treat civilians the way he'd dealt with fellow degenerates behind bars. One glance around the room was enough to remind Shane that Ros was built from different stock.

Over his bed, Ros had a poster of a painting with a pretty red-haired lady leaning down from horseback to kiss a knight in armor, and his small

desk nearby was cluttered with sketches and colorful crayons. Right above it, the fairy prince mask he'd worn for Halloween proudly hung from a hook. There were no boxing gloves, no photos of fast cars, and no knife hidden under his pillow.

And yet as the wait extended, and Shane started realizing Ros might have not lied about his father being here, an ugly idea reared his head, which at that moment seemed more attainable than the one with the dirty video.

He stormed out of the room, past Brad, who flattened against the wall as Shane ran past him, and then down the stairs, straight for the double doors leading into the courtyard. His head pulsed with unvoiced anger, and in that moment he knew he needed to make Ed Beck look him in the eye and see what he'd done.

Ros was the first to turn Shane's way, and his eyes widened, but Shane was focused on the man in a dark suit. Ed Beck had gained a few pounds in the ten years since Shane had seen him in real life, yet he somehow seemed smaller, less significant, like an old sweater that had gained several holes over the years. If it wasn't for the expensive clothes and grooming regimen, he would have been the picture of mediocrity.

Ed Beck followed his son's gaze and stared at Shane, his round features expressing precisely nothing, as if they'd been carved in a piece of concrete. The little cross pin attached to the pocket of his blue shirt reflected the light into Shane's face, as if Ed Beck wouldn't lower himself to confront Shane directly and chose to agitate him instead.

Shane swallowed a big gulp of air and dashed down the lane cutting through the lawn and leading to the road and the black limousine with leather seats. And its owner.

Behind his father's back, Ros shook his head violently, forbidding Shane from approaching, but Shane was done with playing the nice guy.

"Are you a member of the fraternity?" Ed Beck asked with a polite smile, stunning Shane into stupor.

Did he... did he not recognize Shane? Was he even aware Shane had done his time and left prison? Or did he not care because for him the matter that changed the whole trajectory of Shane's life had been a minor obstacle left in the past?

He stalled as images from ten years ago flashed through his mind at lightspeed. The cops flattening Shane against the asphalt and putting cuffs on his wrists. The raw panic in Frank's eyes. Beck's tears, as he accused Shane of driving the car in his stead and hitting the woman.

Ten years lost. On this man who didn't recognize Shane, as if the life he'd messed up had been only a spider he'd absent-mindedly squashed with the tip of his shoe.

"No," came out of Shane in a dull voice.

"He's an electrician," Ros offered, stepping closer, pale as a sheet. "All okay with the plugs in my room then?"

He might have as well stabbed Shane with one of the tools he used for carving. It wouldn't have killed him but still hurt like a motherfucker and would leave the wound infected.

His shoulders dropped, but despite knowing violence would have made him feel better, fatigue overcame his body as if he'd just been covered by a lead blanket. "I'm Shane."

The bitter disappointment of not being recognized was sweetened with the tiniest bit of sugar when Ed Beck stiffened and stepped in front of his son as if Shane was a hyena on the prowl for lion cubs.

“You can work elsewhere. Tell your boss to assign someone else to this building.”

Ros looked between them in confusion. “That’s a bit rude, Dad. No need for that.”

“Wow. Thanks. So fucking kind of you,” Shane snapped, stepping off the curb and onto the asphalt, suddenly unsure which of the Becks provoked his anger more.

“Shane...” Ros tried with a deep sigh, as if it was Shane who was being difficult, not the two privileged fucks toying with him.

Ed Beck’s face became darker than it already had been because of his fake tan. “Has he been trying to befriend you?”

Ros raised his hands. “It’s not like that,” he protested, twisting the invisible chisel into Shane’s liver. He seemed so innocent with all that wavy hair. Anyone would have believed his word over Shane’s.

“I don’t care what it’s like. I’ll be complaining about the fact that your presence here is putting students in danger. Ex-cons might need jobs, but definitely not on the University campus,” Beck said through gritted teeth, smiting Shane with his blue glare.

Shane smelled copper. He wanted to unfold his knife, stab it into the bastard’s throat, and feel the heat of blood on his cheeks, but if he did that here, revenge would land him in prison forever. He had enough self-control to not throw away his freedom so easily.

Instead, he glared at the only weapon he could use against Beck, the pretty boy with cheeks like ripe apples.

“It’s not fair of you to say that,” Ros mumbled, but his father grabbed him by the arm and gave it a shake.

“If I catch you hanging out with this man, we’ll have a different kind of conversation!”

“We’re not ‘hanging out’! Jesus!” Ros raised his voice and pulled away as if he’d been smacked.

Shane’s first instinct had been to step in, to punch Ed Beck for daring to put his hands on Ros, but who would he be doing that for? A boy who was ashamed to admit they knew each other?

Shane’s life was only a rock under Ed Beck’s shoe, even if he finally recognized the unusual pattern setting him apart from thousands of others the man had stepped over to get where he was.

Shane spun around and walked back toward the frat house, because he’d left his bike on the other side. He was pretty sure he’d heard the word “scum” somewhere in the loud conversation he was leaving behind, but it didn’t matter anymore. Nothing fucking mattered. His gamble hadn’t paid off. For all his promises and sweet words, Ros only wanted him when it was convenient, and worse yet—Ed Beck was now aware of Shane hanging out around his precious son—a bullet Shane had shot into his own foot by appearing in front of the bastard.

He wanted to set fire to that expensive fucking limo!

A part of him expected for Ros to follow him, apologize, at least fucking lie that this wouldn’t happen again, but there were no footsteps echoing behind him.

It rained a lot lately, so he liked to leave his ride under an awning at the side of the building, by a door that led to the communal kitchen.

He’d hoped to just get going, and sulk on his own, but if this day hadn’t been unbearable already, fucking *Brad* emerged by his bike with his arms crossed on his chest and tut-tutting with a frown.

“Hey, man. I told you not to park here.”

Shane huffed, the energy that he’d so far restrained bubbling to the surface and prickling at his skin. “Or what?”

“I don’t wanna fight you about this. Just don’t.”

Shane slammed his fist into Brad’s abs, and as the bastard bent in half, he smashed him in the chin so hard the muscular body arched right back, only stopping once it hit the wall. Blood bubbled at Brad’s lips as he opened his eyes, staring at Shane in disbelief, but he chose not to act out. After a tense moment, Shane returned to his bike and switched it on without a word.

He tried to clear his mind and will his throat to relax, but as sweat beaded under his clothes. The uncertainty on Rosen’s face kept creeping back into his mind, like a fucking brain tapeworm refusing to leave his skull yet sucking all life out.

Shane’s pretty boy was ashamed of him.

Brad didn’t even say a word, just fled like the cockroach he was, and Shane drove off with a screech of tyres, desperately trying to outrun his own thoughts.

He was supposed to ruin Ros and bring down Ed Beck in the process. Instead, he’d gotten mushy on the inside like a fucking schoolboy enamoured with the first hole he fucked. He should have known better than to hope for the affections of a guy so far out of his league.

Enough was enough. And if Shane couldn’t get his way by being nice, he’d get it by force.

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Chapter 11 – Ros

Ros glanced at the photo he'd taken of Shane and Cerberus on the day the injured dog had been released into Shane's care. He'd managed to catch the exact moment the beast decided to turn and lick its new master's face, and the look of dread in Shane's green eyes never failed to make Ros chuckle.

Until today.

Ros hung his head and exhaled, staring at the handsome man who added so much color and excitement to his life yet who'd acted so out of character yesterday. Their argument had been a shitshow, but while Ros was ready to forgive Shane, his messages and calls kept being met with silence.

On edge and constantly checking his phone in hopes of seeing the familiar flashing light of a new message, he'd hardly slept. It didn't help that each toss and turn reminded him that while he laid on the comfiest mattress in his dad's grand countryside home, Shane shared his tiny room with a boiler, which growled every time someone needed to use hot water.

A part of him regretted not taking Shane's offer of spending Thanksgiving at Frank's. That small room was far from comfortable, but still pretty cozy when they'd slept in it together in Shane's narrow bed. And as contrarian as Shane had acted yesterday, Ros still felt guilty over

pretending they weren't even friends and had been pondering a surprise visit since they'd parted. That moment when Shane had cut him with his green gaze before averting his eyes and disappearing from sight remained a thorn in Ros's chest—a constant reminder of how shallow his rebellion against Dad was if he feared to call Shane a friend.

When his phone buzzed, he instantly swiped away from the dog photo to the chain of messages he'd sent since yesterday, but there was no response from his man, and the notification had just been a prompt for him to continue his Latin lessons on Duolingo.

Ros groaned and put a pillow over his face to silence his scream.

He'd fucked up. Shane was no angel and had crossed the line when he tried to push Ros into doing the recording, but Ros shared the blame for how that interaction had spun off the rails. Fucking *electrician*. Why had he said that? He'd needed to come up with *something*, but the way Shane had stared at him in that moment could have frozen a man to death. Why couldn't he have stayed in the room like Ros had asked him to?

He flinched when a loud knock disturbed the peace of his room.

Father. Only he would have banged on his door in a way so demanding and then walked in before Ros could have decided how to respond. Dressed in a woolen waistcoat over a black shirt, and his best glasses, his father looked ready to have festive pictures taken, for everyone to see what a happy life he led with his family.

It didn't matter that in reality, the temperature of their relationship was closer to freezing than familial warmth when a bit of photoshop could tweak the colors and create the image of domestic bliss.

At least Dad hadn't invited a professional photographer this time.

"Why are you hiding in your room? I know Jessica's helping in the kitchen, but you should pay her some attention. You're being rude."

Ros dragged himself up to sit on the bed. He'd even complied with the boring dress code of a light blue shirt and khakis, so Dad would leave him alone, but that sacrifice hadn't been enough.

"What kind of attention *should* I pay her? I don't know her." Ros knew exactly what was expected of him, but he disagreed with this attempt to make him interact with the kind of girl he ought to be dating and wouldn't do it without prompting.

Dad stared at him for several seconds before speaking in a softer tone, as if he were worried they might end up being overheard. "Your mother raised you really badly if you don't know that if there's a single lady in the home, the young single man should entertain her, not play games on his cell phone! Lisa invited her over because her whole family's away, and you are neglecting her!"

What Dad really wanted was to pair Ros with the pretty brunette in a perfectly conservative sweater and knee-high boots that made her fit right into Instagram's #ILoveFall. There was nothing wrong with Jessica, but he was gay, and what he wanted was for Shane to text him back, then fuck his brains out, not sample pumpkin spice lattes with a girl he didn't know.

"How do you know Shane?" he asked, wanting to divert Dad's attention to the topic he was actually interested in. Something had been off in yesterday's conversation, and Ros could smell it from a mile away, but Dad wouldn't let him get a word in, instead ranting about Shane being "*scum*" and "*inappropriate company*".

"Oh, so he has a name?" Dad snapped despite having ignored that topic since their arrival last night.

Ros got to his feet because he would not have this conversation with Dad looking down at him. "He introduced himself. What I don't understand is how *you* know he's an ex-con."

Father took a deep breath, but his body remained tense, as if he were a predator gathering the energy for an attack, which was particularly jarring in the large bedroom that was still decorated with reproductions of Ros's favorite paintings. "I know him because he hit a pedestrian while driving my car. The question is, why is he hovering around you?"

Ros stared at him, going hot and cold at the same time. Shane hadn't disclosed why he'd served time despite claiming he had been falsely convicted, and Ros hadn't pried.

"*What?* How did that happen?" Ros crossed his arms over his chest with a frown.

"Why the hell would that matter to you? *Why* was he in the frat house, Rosen?" Dad snapped, his round face turning purple.

The hurt that had passed over Shane's face yesterday kept away the reflexive need to lie. "We're kinda friends, okay? I didn't want to say because I knew you'd have a problem with it! And you should be happy I want to know your side of the story."

"My side of the story? Whatever he told you is lies! I should have never even *looked* at him, and paying him to drive me home had been the worst error of judgment in my life, but that poor woman's death is still partially on my conscience. It's a cross I need to bear, but I will not let you be anywhere around that piece of trash!"

Ros hung his head, but there was no point in fighting Dad about this. He wouldn't change his mind. What Ros needed to do was talk to Shane. Because Shane wasn't trash. And if he'd made the mistake of driving while drunk, it had been a mistake he'd already paid for with ten years of his life. The man Rosen knew now was trying to pull his life together and had gentle lips that showered Ros with attention.

"Fine. Whatever."

“It’s not, fine, Rosen! You need to look me in the eye and promise that you will not see this man again,” Dad said, squeezing Rosen’s shoulder. Rosen got his looks from his mother’s side of the family, so when they stood side by side his father was like a concrete block towering over a young tree and threatening to squash it.

Ros met Dad’s glare. “I promise not to hang out with him.” *Lies*. If Ros had his way, he’d be riding Shane’s dick by the time this day was over.

They measured one another with glares hot enough to make the water evaporate from the glass standing on Ros’s nightstand, but in the end Dad walked out and gestured for Ros to follow. “The pecan pie is Jessica’s, so make sure you praise it.”

The first thought that popped into Ros’s brain was that maybe he could sneak some away for Shane, but the truth was that Shane might not want anything from him, and just imagining that reality had Ros’s heart filling with lead as he followed Dad down the broad staircase and into the entrance hall decorated for the occasion with bouquets of flowers and fruit in warm fall colors. They moved in silence, and fortunately Jessica, and his stepmom, Lisa, were listening to seasonal music in the kitchen, so Ros hoped he could get away with speaking as little as possible.

He greeted Jessica with a fake smile and told her how happy he was to have her over. He didn’t enjoy deception, but he was a good actor and could put on a show if necessary. Sometimes life was easier that way, and as long as she didn’t bat her pretty eyelashes at him too much, he could just treat her like any other family guest.

Lisa, father’s new wife, shimmered like a disco ball in a silvery cocktail dress. With highlighter brightening her cheekbones, she resembled a Barbie doll depicting someone at least ten years younger than her forty-something self. That youthfulness was a trait Dad appreciated, regardless of

how it had been achieved. Having a spouse too far apart in age would have seemed inappropriate to the most conservative crowd, but a lady ten years his junior who looked as though she might step onto the runway straight out of her Lamborghini was *aspirational* for many of Dad's male voters.

She was bending over by the oven in their massive kitchen, but the turkey wasn't yet ready, so she offered Ros a platter of finger food, as if he weren't about to be completely stuffed in a few hours' time.

"Have you pre-recorded tonight's forecast?" Jessica asked, nodding toward a collage of photos taken with famous people Lisa had met, thanks to her job as the region's most popular weather lady. It was just the thing to ask, and Lisa bloomed with smiles.

"More experienced presenters get time off on holidays, especially when they have families," she said with pride and gave Dad's stomach a gentle pat on the way to the pantry. "A man's gotta eat. And I have two of them to feed."

"Do you play any sports, Rosen?" Jessica asked.

As soon as Ros opened his mouth, Dad patted his shoulder. "He used to be great at baseball. If he weren't so smart, I would have pushed him to go professional."

Jessica's big brown eyes lit up. "Really? That's amazing. What do you do now then? Rocket science?" She giggled and poked Ros's shoulder.

"Nah, I study art—"

But Dad wouldn't even let him finish. "He's always been this way. A man who needs to do things his way, but still couldn't help himself and joined the same fraternity I had when I was his age."

Lisa smiled at them as she poured wine into four glasses. "Weren't you saying that you plan to become an architect?"

Because architecture was so much more respectable than sculpture. And in the eyes of the public, would make more money. The most appropriate career for an artistic man from a well-connected family.

“Very good choice, son!” Father said and gave Rosen’s shoulder a gentle slap before focusing his attention on Jessica. “And you... you’re studying medicine, correct?”

Jessica gave a short, sweet chuckle, as if it pleased her that he remembered. “I’m only in my first year, but I aim to specialize in dermatology.”

Lisa nodded, taking a sip of her wine. “Very sound choice. You won’t have to deal with the less pleasant aspects of being a doctor.”

Jessica stalled and gave a shy laugh as she met Rosen’s gaze and adjusted perfect locks of brown hair. “Well, skin conditions can be very dangerous, so I wouldn’t say I’ll get to avoid all of it.”

“So I’ve got this rash...” Dad made a move as if to open his shirt, and Ros could’ve just about died of embarrassment.

“Oh, Ed! Stop it!” Lisa laughed and grabbed his hand.

Ros gave Jessica an apologetic smile, and she winked at him as if they were sharing a moment of rapport, but the sudden silence lured his gaze to the floor where, between his dad and Lisa’s feet lay a little plastic bag filled with some kind of powder and marked with a pink sticker.

His throat pulsed, and a deep heat shot to his face as Lisa bent over, without a care for how much her dress revealed. She snatched the packet at the speed of a cheetah chasing prey. “Ah... silly me. New clothes. I’ve forgotten to remove the silica beads out of the pocket,” she said even though the dress didn’t have any pockets, so she must have been hiding the drugs in her underwear.

Lisa had only been back five months after a discreet rehab program in Wyoming, but old habits died hard. Ros stepped back and glanced at Jessica, who stared at Lisa's manicured hand, which clutched the plastic pouch. Because of course she hadn't believed the pale powder to be silica.

Father squeezed Lisa's arm as he spoke with lips pressed tightly to his teeth. "Honey, I need to ask you something about the photos. Ros, maybe you could show Jessica around the garden?"

"Oh, I think I need to freshen up a bit before dinner," Jessica said in a high-pitched voice, her smile clearly forced.

Ros knew how she felt. He didn't want to be here either nor endure the tense atmosphere that would surely settle over the dinner table. Especially not when Shane was out there, upset about their last interaction. When he looked at the turkey sizzling in the oven and imagined spending endless hours with their guest, addict stepmother, and a father on a constant quest to keep up appearances, he made his decision. If Shane refused to answer his messages, it was time to take matters into his own hands.

He would go to the junkyard and surprise him. Apologize and switch off his phone so they could spend Thanksgiving together, unbothered by Dad's calls and threats.

His behavior must have seemed so cold to a guy who'd spent ten years behind bars and now formed an attachment to someone who didn't want him around for the first holiday since he'd gotten out. Of course he was upset.

They would have to discuss Shane's violent reaction to the push, and his requests for a sexy video, but those could surely be explained by lack of social skills.

Ros flinched when Dad clicked his fingers in front of his face, already pulling Lisa toward the hallway. "In that case, could you bring the

pumpkin puree from the basement?”

Could he ever. The excuse to disappear fell right into his lap, and he nodded with a smile. He was so eager to leave he had to force himself to not dash outside. But as soon as he turned the corner, he was off.

He ran to his room, grabbed the backpack he hadn't even opened, and raced against time to the garage as soon as he heard the guest room door shut behind Jessica. Fortunately, his old car, which still hadn't been sold wasn't blocked by any of Dad's five prized BMWs, so he sped out, not even bothering to lock the garage behind him.

Was it crazy? Yes. But he'd deal with the fallout later. What mattered now was getting to the man who'd become much more important to Ros than Dad's approval had ever been.

Ros was about to buckle the seatbelt for the road ahead when his cell phone buzzed. It was surely just another Facebook notification, a reminder from Duolingo, or wishes from a friend, but despite the pressure to disappear before Dad noticed what he was up to, Ros grabbed the cell phone and stalled with confetti falling in his skull.

Shane had decided to respond at last. The message was short, and gruff, and said that if Ros wanted to talk then he should come to the junkyard tonight. An ultimatum to choose between family and his lover of only a few weeks should have been shot down if Rosen had any sense left, but he'd already made up his mind.

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Chapter 12 – Shane

Shane couldn't settle. His mind had been racing since he'd parted from Ros yesterday, but the speed of his thoughts couldn't disperse the storm brewing inside his skull. Even his blood ran cold, as if the anticipation of the inevitable filled him equally with anger and dread.

After ignoring at least a dozen messages from Ros, he'd half expected the same treatment, but Rosen not only replied almost immediately but also agreed to Shane's terms, running from his dad's house on Thanksgiving.

And while Shane had everything prepared for the trap he'd set for the boy, his heart remained unsettled. He stood by the open gate, waiting for Ros's arrival as the cold wind howled, sneaking under his jacket and scratching at the bare neck he should have covered with a scarf. At least the cold kept him on his toes, aware of what he needed to do. This time, there wouldn't be any change to his plans and no mercy.

Tonight, he would capture Rosen Beck on camera, and he would make sure Beck Senior saw the recording.

Ros's headlights blinded him for a moment, but he'd gotten used to the brightness by the time the car approached him at a steady pace. On the night they'd met, Ros had dazzled Shane with striking blue eyes and shimmering skin, but he'd seemed harmless at the time, and Shane had let

him come far too close. Tonight, this silliness would end. Shane wasn't Rosen Beck's college sweetheart, but a tough guy who'd spent ten years in prison and had a grudge the size of a NASCAR stadium.

Ros's window lowered as he passed the gate, and the familiar face emerged, relaxing into the softest of smiles. "I just couldn't stay there any longer."

Shane peeked into the bright eyes that were so full of relief that for a moment he wanted to climb into the cab, have the boy drive them to Frank's home and celebrate that Thanksgiving dinner after all. But he'd made that mistake too many times already, so he offered him a sparse smile instead and got in from the other side, choking on air fragrant with Ros's natural aroma.

"Yeah?" he asked, noting that Ros's cell phone lay in the cup holder, and when it buzzed, Rosen tossed it to the back seat with a shake of his head.

Ros drove on as if he couldn't wait for the turkey. "And you weren't answering me. I thought you were mad at me, and then my dad dropped this whole bomb about you on me, and I'm so confused."

Shane had to bite his tongue to keep in a hiss of rage. He knew exactly what kind of bullshit old Beck would have told Ros, and it took all of his willpower not to contradict the lies. By the time this night was over, Rosen's opinion of him would reach such lows that the reality behind Shane's prison sentence wouldn't matter.

And while he hated the thought of Ros finally seeing through the shimmery veil of good sex to see the scum hiding behind the pretty facade, there was nothing that could turn him back from the path he'd chosen tonight. The boy had shown his true colors when he'd rejected Shane in

front of his dad, and Shane had already invested too much in this relationship that not only wouldn't but *couldn't* end well.

Better to put an end to it now and start living with a clean slate.

Ros might have gotten the hint that he wasn't going to be forgiven on the merit of his smile, and quieted, focusing on the road ahead. He only voiced a question about their destination when they reached a crossroads and Shane gestured for him to turn away from Frank's house and drive farther into the fields of scrap.

There was no point in chatting to a guy you wanted to fuck over.

The place he was leading the boy to was well hidden in the very heart of the junkyard. Frank sometimes kept people there for the local biker gang, and since abduction and false imprisonment were frowned upon, he'd made sure it could only be reached by someone who knew the labyrinthine roads in this part of the junkyard. It was the perfect spot for Shane to execute his plan.

As they drove on in silence, the tension inside the cab thickened until even Shane found it hard to breathe. Still, Rosen didn't voice the worries he surely had and followed the winding track between piles of trash until the headlights licked the front of a red shipping container that had junk piled on all its sides for isolation.

This was where their relationship would end.

"We're here," Shane said and slid out into the night.

"Here... where?" Ros swallowed and glanced at him with brows drawn in surprise, still unaware of the danger he was in. "Is it because you want to talk in private?" he offered the excuse to Shane on a silver platter.

"Yeah," Shane muttered and led the way toward the hidden lockup. His chest felt as if there were holes in his heart, but it was better to put an

end to this entire chapter now rather than prolong this torture. He wished to never hear the name Beck again. Maybe in a headline.

‘Disgraced politician shunned by his party’

The hinges squeaked when he pulled on the massive door and made a broad gesture to invite Ros into the dark mouth of the container.

Ros chuckled, glancing back at him, but the tension around his eyes betrayed his unease. Were he to run back to the car and drive off without a word, Shane would have let him. Instead, Ros chose to trust the one man he shouldn't have.

“Okay, creepy,” he said, yet entered the impromptu cell as if he were the Thanksgiving turkey willingly stepping into the slaughterhouse.

Shane breathed in the scent of Ros's cologne when the smaller body rolled against his accidentally-on-purpose, as if this were still a game of desire. He shut his eyes and listened to the soft footsteps echoing inside the container, but once they stilled, he entered the elongated interior himself and shut the door before quickly circling the handles inside with a chain and locking it with a padlock.

For a moment, they stayed in eerie silence, and all he could hear was their breath, but there was no point in prolonging any of this so he switched on the light, illuminating the metal walls, the mattress covered with a black sheet, and the camera standing on a tripod in the corner to his right.

Ros backed against the wall so fast the impact resonated along all the metal walls. “Shane? What is this? This isn't funny.” His voice got a higher pitch and he glanced to the locked door with fear settling in his eyes for the first time.

Shane rolled his shoulders when something pinched his nape. “No,” He said and switched on the camera. The silence rang in his ears as if he'd just been punched in the head, but he focused on adjusting the stand so its

lens focused on the empty mattress rather than on the boy awaiting his sentence.

“I get it, you’re mad about being dismissed in front of my dad, but I don’t like this.” Ros’s chest worked fast as he took in the room. The rusty walls, the empty bucket in the corner, and the dirty floor didn’t predict anything good even for a soul as pure as him.

“You see me exactly as he does. But it doesn’t matter. Let’s just do what I wanted to do from the start. Strip,” Shane said coldly, pressing the recording button, since he could edit out the unnecessary footage later.

Ros inched toward the door with his back glued to the wall, his face pale as a sheet. “No! What is wrong with you? What the fuck? What do you mean ‘from the start’? Is this... is this about my dad? He told me—”

Shane snapped, charging toward Ros so violently the boy’s head hit the wall when he attempted to back away. “Your *dad* killed a woman while drunk, called us to get rid of the body, and when the cops appeared, he claimed I’ve been the one behind the wheel! Don’t you fucking dare to throw his lies at me!”

Ros’s pupils widened, and he pressed on Shane’s chest to create some distance, but Shane wouldn’t be pushed away. Ros was on his turf, and he didn’t have a say in what was about to go down.

“I... why didn’t you tell me? Did you... approach me on purpose?” Rosen asked when understanding blurred his eyes.

Shane stalled, his jaw clenching as he pulled on Rosen’s arm and pushed him toward the makeshift bed. He just wanted to get this over with. “Take off your clothes. I’ll let you go once we’re done.”

Ros felt like a rag doll in his hands, but when he looked back at Shane, his eyes glistened with tears in the stark light of the lamp. “*This* is what you wanted from me?” He clenched his teeth. “I’m not doing shit! I

drove all the way here to spend time with you, I ditched my family, and... you must think I'm really dumb."

Shane's fingers ached, and he stretched them to relax the unpleasant tension in his hands. But it didn't matter that Ros cared for him, because Shane didn't want to keep playing this charade. He needed this clean break.

"Just do it, Ros."

Ros hugged himself. "N-no. This is... it's disgusting. What are you doing? I—who are you even?"

The words were like needles pushed under Shane's nails, but he didn't budge, as steady as all the other times when he'd done terrible things to get by. Tears didn't move him anymore. "Your dad warned you I'm scum. You should have listened to him."

Ros scanned him from head to toe, and Shane could see every desperate calculation behind the pretty eyes. "Please. Shane. You can't do this to me." He took a step closer as if he thought he was a wolf-tamer, and put his hands on Shane's hips, already moving them in search of a key.

Ros knew what effect he'd always had on Shane and didn't hesitate to use it. A part of Shane admired his cool in the face of danger, but he wasn't born yesterday. Before the slender hand could have dived into his pocket, he grabbed the boy and tossed him at the mattress so hard Ros wasn't able to save himself and fell on it face-first.

"It's either this or I make sure everyone connects you to Pete's disappearance," he said.

Hurting another person had never been so goddamn hard.

Then again, he'd only ever beaten people up, not fucked them for blackmail.

Ros turned as fast as he could and sat up, stilling at Shane's words. "You wouldn't. Your DNA's all over that, and you'd incriminate your

buddies too!” He was like a pretty butterfly, pinned to the wall, yet still desperately fluttering its wings. Too bad those were getting ripped off soon. Shane had enjoyed stroking them when they were intact.

“So what? I spent a third of my life in the can. It feels like home. But how would *you* fare in there with that pretty face?” he asked, making sure to pin the boy with his gaze so his meaning would be understood without any doubts.

As those words left his mouth, scenes from prison passed through his mind, and when he imagined Ros accosted in the showers, it became clear as day that he would have never implicated him in anything that would put him behind bars. But the bluff would remain effective for as long as he appeared cruel and unfeeling.

Ros’s lip curled when they dueled, with eyes as their weapons. “I hate you,” he whispered, but must have understood he was cornered, because the graceful fingers Shane had so often kissed moved to the buttons of his shirt. He unveiled the pale skin hiding under the elegant fabric, but his fingers trembled, and every second felt like an hour.

Shane flinched but then remembered the way Ed Beck had stared at him yesterday, and how Rosen wouldn’t even admit to them being friends. The sudden flash of anger set off a charge deep in his chest.

“*Hate me?* You don’t fucking know what that word means! Your father called me to deal with his mess and paid me by blaming me for something he did. Ten years lost! That’s a third of my life! I wish to fucking squash his neck with a vise, cut off his fingers, then feed him his own dick, but that would have landed me on death row. This is the next best thing, and I need to destroy him, even if I have to walk all over you to do it!”

Ros threw his shirt to the floor and looked away when tears rolled down his cheeks. “Let’s get this over with then,” he said, but the moment

Shane knelt on the mattress, set on executing his plan, Ros's elbow came at his eye out of nowhere.

It wasn't the strongest of punches, but the elbow was a damn hard place, and the eye—one of the most vulnerable. The hit toppled Shane as a dull pain spread over the surface of his skull before reaching deep into his head, as if he'd been stabbed.

"Fuck," he roared, but when the soft surface shifted, he had enough willpower to grab Ros's ankle and cut his legs from under him.

The boy yelped when falling, and Shane pulled him right back to the mattress, but instead of freezing like before, Ros kept lashing out. Shane's fighting experience kicked in and he blocked as many knees and elbows thrown his way as he could, but even as he managed to press Ros down, the boy smacked him in the face, dragging his nails over it with a primal screech of fury.

Shane stiffened, gritting his teeth when each muscle in his body itched to respond in kind, but when he opened his eyes and looked into the twisted features partially obscured by his own shadow, the natural urge to beat the shit out of the guy who dared to lay a finger on him dispersed like spit in a river.

"Calm down!" he roared as he managed to grab Ros's wrists and pin them to the mattress, while blocking Ros's legs with his own.

Ros's heart rattled against Shane's chest, and his sweet breath came out in frantic hisses. "I. Will. Not." He met Shane's gaze and only quick thinking saved Shane from getting headbutted. "We both know you're stronger and that I'll lose. But I'll give you all I've got. So go on. Try to film this *rape*. I will kick and scream all the way through. Gag me and tie me up if you wanna stop me. Won't be much of a sex tape though, will it?"

he growled, tossing his head so violently his beautiful hair escaped the tidy bun he'd arrived with.

Shane couldn't have been softer. In fact, in that moment, he feared his dick might have shrivelled and would never work again. "I... what?"

He was so confused he let Ros's hand slip out of his grip, and Ros's next punch got him in the lip, leaving a coppery aftertaste in his mouth. He cursed and held both of his wrists down before climbing on top and pressing his knee to the slender chest.

He had no doubt Ros was terrified, but his gaze was now steel despite the tears streaking his face. "You heard me," the boy snarled, and with all his limbs helpless, he used the one weapon still available to him. He spat at Shane. "I believe what you said about my dad. But that only means you're *both* scum!"

Shane stilled as the warm spit rolled down his cheek. The hot tar bubbling inside him was reaching his throat, and as it invaded his mouth, making it taste bitter, he found he could no longer look at Ros's tear-soaked face. As he glanced away, his eyes met the lens of the camera, and he shook with disgust, rolling off the boy.

"Fine. Go back to him. Take his money. Why make your life harder?" he roared, heading for the door with the key already in hand. He wanted Ros gone. Now. Immediately.

Ros didn't wait a second to get up, but moved against the wall opposite to Shane, keeping as much distance as possible. He even grabbed the empty bucket in anticipation of needing it for protection.

"It's not my fault he fucked up your life!" Ros yelled, and his shouting made Shane's skull vibrate, rendering his efforts to push the key into the lock useless.

Shane's head pulsed. His heart beat so fast he felt as if he might drop dead at any second, but he still managed to open the padlock and tossed it to the floor along with the chain. "Fuck you! Now get lost."

Ros was through the door within the blink of an eye, and he didn't look back until he opened his car door. "Don't come near me again, or I'll call the cops on you!" he yelled, already sliding behind the wheel. He'd left his shirt behind, and his body trembled from the cold.

Shane stood in the open door of the container, struck by disbelief when the headlights shone straight at him.

Rosen was leaving. Shane was letting him. And all he had to show for this mess was a tape incriminating *him*. How the fuck did that happen? He'd been planning this evening since yesterday, and now Rosen had left him with nothing.

Nothing but a deep hatred for himself. Because whenever he thought of being the cause of Ros's tears, he wished to punch himself in the other eye, so he wouldn't have to see the shiny streaks trailing down that beautiful face a moment longer.

But it wouldn't help because the features twisted with terror and a sense of betrayal were right in front of him every time he closed his eyes.

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Chapter 13 – Shane

Shane couldn't finish watching the damn video. Seeing Ros realize he'd been lured into a trap made him feel like puking, and the man who'd tried to force Ros into sex in front of the camera? Shane didn't recognize himself in that bastard. His voice sounded deeper, like that of the grim reaper delivering Ros's sentence, and even the way he moved seemed painfully unfamiliar.

Or was this the real him?

Scum.

Liar.

Rapist.

He hadn't considered what his plan implied until Ros had called the threat what it was, and Shane was still too shocked to think clearly.

Just two days ago, all he'd wanted was for Ros to see him as his equal. The boyfriend he'd be proud to introduce to his friends. So Ros hurt his feelings and rejected him. Big fucking deal. Shane should have gotten over himself and punched Ed Beck from some other direction that might have landed him in jail, but would have kept the boy from seeing him for the piece of trash he'd been all along.

The spit in his face had hurt more than any punch and kick. And before this disaster of an evening, Ros had always been so trusting, so accommodating, full of understanding for Shane's prison time and willing to give him mountains of affection.

It was as if fury had caused a fever that scrambled his brain, but Shane didn't deserve such excuses. He had fucked up and was so ashamed of his actions that he refused to go back home for the night. So he slept on the damn mattress until he couldn't take the cold anymore early in the morning.

He deleted the recording, and then smashed the memory card with a rock before drowning it in a puddle. The lack of sleep made him groggy and so puzzled he initially lost his way in the labyrinth of paths designed to confuse nosy visitors, despite knowing the way like the back of his own hand.

With the shirt Ros had left behind tucked under his hoodie, Shane dragged his feet forward until Frank's home came into view, complete with a single inflatable turkey in the drab garden full of mud and rocks. Shane could only hope everyone was still asleep.

Maybe if he stayed in bed for a week, last night could become a bad dream that had never happened. Still, he glanced at his phone with the kind of hope only the least introspective men had, but there were no new messages from Ros. Even after the argument they'd had at the frat, Ros had still been desperate to reach him. Not anymore.

Cerberus crawled out of his doghouse the moment he sensed Shane's presence, but he didn't bark and instead just welcomed his master with a wagging tail and many kisses. The warmth of his tongue felt so soothing Shane needed to get away from it, fearing what might happen if his walls crumbled. So he left Cer some jerky and approached the front of the house.

He attempted to move as quietly as possible, but he could hear Frank grinding coffee for his morning brew the moment he stepped inside. Shane could swear that man didn't know the meaning of the word rest, though maybe that wasn't a fair assessment, considering that the table was still overflowing with dirty plates and cake that hadn't been put away after last night's dinner.

Unwilling to speak to anyone, he made step after careful step, rolling his feet from the heels to the toes. Some bits of the floor were more stable than others, and he chose them on the way to the corridor that led to all the bedrooms. Frank emerged from the pantry, making Shane freeze with blood frantically pulsing in his throat, but his friend was focused on the item he was holding and approached the window to see the fine print at the back of the packaging. With relief blooming in his chest, Shane made the final two leaps as discreetly as possible and let the partition wall hide him from view.

He was sweaty by the time Frank hummed some country song, but his door was within reach, and he placed both hands on the handle before very gently applying pressure.

Shane didn't bother to turn the light on. He dropped to the bed like a stone thrown in the river—

And jumped right up with a scream, because instead of feeling the springs give under his weight, he'd fallen on a bag of meat, blood, and bones. It took two more seconds, and a familiar growl before Shane realized what happened.

"Did you sleep in my bed?" he yelled and pulled on the curtain to get a better look at the offender.

Jag pushed some of the messy brown hair off his face, but his eyes were slits when he met Shane's gaze. "Hn... Frank was supposed to wake me."

Loud footsteps echoed in the corridor, and Frank burst in, his chest filling with air like a balloon Shane wanted to pierce and send all the way to hell.

“What the fuck?” Shane roared, stepping all the way to the wall to see both the men in the tiny, elongated interior furnished only with a single bed and a dresser that held all of Shane’s belongings.

“How did you—? I’ve been in the kitchen this whole time,” Frank said with a frown, but all Shane could think of was Jag rolling around in *his* sheets like some Sasquatch.

And to make matters worse, Cerberus started barking outside.

Jag dashed out of bed, and when the comforter slid off his body, it revealed that he was naked too! “You weren’t there. We all thought you had a good night, but now I’m thinking maybe you didn’t?”

Frank did a double take at Shane. “What happened to you?”

Fuck.

“I don’t wanna fucking talk about it. Why is he rubbing off his filth into my sheets?” Shane roared, gesturing at Jag, who pulled up the pants he’d crafted out of some brown fabric scraps straight onto his skin, without bothering with any underwear.

Frank sighed. “Stop giving him such a hard time. You know I make him shower.”

Jag stretched, as if he wanted to show off the scars on his muscular chest. There was barely any fat on him, but the strength held by his wiry form was still obvious. “If you hadn’t sat on me, you wouldn’t have known I was here, that’s how useless your sense of smell is.”

Shane tried to punch him in the stomach, but Jag leapt back and landed on the bed with both feet, his eyes darting to the sides, as if he were

looking for his spear. Shane was about to go after him when Frank grabbed him around the waist. “Calm the fuck down!”

“No! Why is he here?”

“Why would he sleep on the couch when you were somewhere out there fucking your boy all night long?” Frank groaned and passed Jag an old sweater the wild man must have decorated with beads himself, because their position at the front made no sense. “I would really rather find out why your face is bruised and scratched as if someone threw you into the trash disposal.”

Shane stalled and pulled away from Frank until he filled the corner, which, annoyingly trapped him with his escape route cut off by both the men. “It’s nothing.”

Jag cocked his head, draping a waterproof poncho on his shoulders. “I would have protected you if you called for help,” he said, presenting Shane a whistle that he never took off his neck

Frank sniggered, and Shane shook his head, uttering a guttural scream. “Jesus fuck! I need a drink. And for the record, your protection is the last thing I want, Jag!”

Frank pointed to the corridor. “Okay, okay, let’s get a drink and you can tell us what happened.”

“I’m not gonna tell you a fucking thing,” Shane grunted but followed him into the kitchen that smelled of coffee and the leftovers that hadn’t been cleared after last night’s festivities. The pies were resting in the middle, like a silent invitation, and while they’d both been butchered by someone who had cut bits from the middle, Shane still salivated.

Frank groaned and put two beers on the edge of the table. “Fine, but I need to know if there’s more trouble to follow up whatever happened.” He pointed in the general direction of Shane’s face.

Shane sank into the seat, glaring at the plate in front of him. There were crumbs on the opaque glass, and some melted ice cream that had long dried-up, but when his stomach let out a meaningful grumble, he reached for the pecan pie and took the whole remaining chunk just as Frank put the open beer in front of him.

“Shane. Does the person who did this have buddies who will show up on my doorstep with baseball bats, or can I have my breakfast in peace?” Frank took out a piece of store-bought bread and walked up to the fridge

Shane shook his head. “If someone comes here, it’s gonna be the cops. And they’d only be here for me. Maybe,” he muttered before breaking off a piece of the pie and stuffing it into his mouth.

Frank’s wide shoulders tensed, and he spun around so fast his braid twirled behind him like a whip. “Fuck. Shane. You’ve barely been out a month. You really that desperate to get back to prison grub?” He opened the fridge with a jerk of his arm before glaring over the shoulder, past Shane. “Jag! Where’s the turkey?”

Silence.

Shane remained still, just chewing the pie while his head crackled with static. He couldn’t even think properly, as if his mind refused to go back to what happened last night. He lost appetite every time he remembered Ros’s tears.

Frank rose, shouting Jag’s name as he looked behind each door, increasingly agitated. Shane flinched when his friend’s bulky form stormed past him to the fridge again. He slammed it shut so loudly all the jars inside clattered. “Fucker took all the meat!”

“Next time, he’ll take the hand you feed him with,” mumbled Shane.

Frank leaned against the fridge with a deep sigh. “I bet he has a fridge in his lair somewhere, I just haven’t found it yet. He’s being good at the

table, but once the meal is done, it's like he can't get it in his head that he shouldn't just take shit without asking."

Shane welcomed the distraction. "Or he just doesn't want to."

Frank shook his head. "Anyway, weren't you out with your boy last night?"

Shane's back tensed so rapidly he scowled at the pain it caused. He didn't want to talk about it, but as the silence went on, and Frank refused to change the topic, his resolve melted away. Maybe someone else's perspective could shed a new light on everything that had happened, so he finally spoke.

"I fucked up, Frank."

His friend sighed and sat down next to him, settling for plain bread and beer drank alternately with coffee. "How so?"

Shane closed his eyes, not ready for the judgment he'd surely receive, but if he'd already said A, he needed to say B as well. "I... locked us in the container and tried to make him do the sex tape."

Frank took a long swig of beer. The man was thirty-eight and had seen shit in his life so wasn't easily shocked, but this time, he did shake his head. "I'm guessing *that* didn't work out as planned."

Shane shrugged. Revealing the truth hadn't made him feel any better. "I don't know what I was fucking thinking. I got angry and... it was a mistake. He will never want to see me again."

Frank nodded. "You said 'tried' so I'm guessing the filming didn't work out? Maybe that's for the better."

Shane scowled. "He started crying. I didn't... didn't know what to do."

Frank lowered his eyes to the table but eventually patted Shane's shoulder. "You did the right thing letting him go. You'll get to Beck another

way.”

“But it’s over,” Shane exploded, dashing to his feet. Blood drummed in his head so loudly he could barely hear his own thoughts, but movement relieved some of the tension in his muscles at least. “Over between me and him.”

Frank frowned at him. “You knew it wasn’t gonna last.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I needed to hear,” Shane growled and took a long swig of the cold beer.

“I’m sorry you don’t like the truth, but that’s life for guys like us. I was surprised he stuck around after the whole body disposal drama. Some things are good while they last and you have to accept them as a nice memory.”

“Oh, so you think you’re so smart, huh?” Shane snapped, breathing heavily as he regarded Frank from the other side of the table. “Not everyone needs to be miserable! He really liked me!”

Frank scratched his wide nose. “And then you tried to fuck him over. What do I know though? Go and get him back if you think you can, but judging by that black eye, I doubt you will.”

Frank meant well, but his words still felt like another stab into an already open wound. Shane grabbed what was left of the pie and stormed out without a word. It had been a mistake to come here. He should have just rotted away in the container until Jag found his corpse and—did whatever Jag did with dead bodies. It wouldn’t matter if Shane was dead.

Shane bit into the bourbon-infused filling and walked around the house, heading for the pen he and Frank had built for Cerberus at the back. The black beast rose to its hind legs as soon as he saw him and whined, wiggling his tail.

At least *someone* was happy to see Shane again. Maybe he hoped for more jerky.

His paw was still healing, and he wore a bright orange cast but seemed disinterested in getting it off. The treatment had consumed a large chunk of Shane's cash, but as flustered as that had made him, each day of Cerberus's recovery made him forget about such trivial things.

In a moment of sappiness, he took a picture of the dog cuddling up to his hand, but didn't follow the urge to send it to Ros in the end. Was this really it? He'd shown his true colors, and Ros was now afraid of him. For good reason.

"What does Frank know, huh? He said *you'd* die, and here we are, healing well, right?"

Cerberus barked his yes, and Shane let him out of the pen, relieved that at least someone didn't want to bring him down. He was fatigued after a whole night without sleep, but Cerberus needed a walk, and Shane didn't want to go back to the house.

"Go on, boy, lead the way," Shane said, shivering when wind snuck under his clothes. He should've gone back to pick up a jacket, but the prospect of seeing Frank again made his stubborn ass follow the black mutt instead.

Cerberus still had tender skin around his neck where the rope had dug in, so Shane had gotten him a harness to wear instead of a collar, but didn't bother with it most of the time at the junkyard, because the beast stayed by his side anyway.

He didn't even urge Cerberus in any particular direction and waited on the path until the dog decided something was worth sniffing or pissing on. The cold was his self-inflicted punishment for yesterday. He knew he'd done the wrong thing, and yet still sulked at being kicked and yelled at.

Spat at.

So he was an idiot and had very clearly proven how unworthy he was of the beautiful, kind Rosen Beck, but that didn't mean he was okay with being apart from him. Still, whenever he looked at that last string of messages and considered reaching out, he couldn't come up with anything meaningful to say. Because how was he to resume their conversation after imprisoning and assaulting Ros?

Sorry?

I didn't mean to?

I've been a jerk?

Can we talk?

Even scum like him knew those weren't appropriate openers after what had happened. He couldn't justify taking Ros's shirt back to him after being told to stay away.

Never.

Just the thought of never again plunging between Ros's legs and seeing his lips tremble in ecstasy twisted Shane inside out. How could he not have seen the good thing he'd had in his grasp until he fucked up? Even though they'd barely met on Halloween, Ros had talked about a future together, one in which they wouldn't have to stay in the closet. He'd been so excited and loving, and Shane had crushed his heart in return.

Cerberus pulled him out of the grim thoughts with a happy bark. He took one look back at Shane to make sure his human followed, and led the way off-path and between the dense piles of rusted junk.

"What are you sensing there, huh? A rabbit nest?" Shane mumbled, following him as the sun came out from behind the dense clouds and reflected into his eyes off a bunch of broken bottles.

He sped up the moment something hissed in response to Cerberus's barking and grabbed a pipe out of the rubble.

"Cer! Come back here!"

But when he turned the corner, all the pent-up need to fight left him.

This was no possum or wolverine. Not even a raccoon.

Jag crouched in front of a tiny hut covered with sheets of metal. In one hand he held his spear, in the other, a half-eaten turkey leg. He glared at Shane, then at Cerberus.

"It's mine!"

The dog barked and glanced Shane's way so rapidly his ears flopped.

"No, it's fucking not! You stole the leftovers that were meant for everyone," Shane growled, stepping closer to the shack. "Is this where you live?" he asked, staring at the foam packed around the structure for isolation.

Quite smart, actually.

"Call off your dog!" Jag snarled, but Cerberus growled right back at him, and took two steps closer, grabbing a bone off the ground. "I took the meat when everyone was done with it, and you still come after me?"

"We weren't done with it! Frank was literally looking for it after you stole it!" Shane hollered and tossed the remaining pie at him.

Jag didn't hesitate and used the turkey leg as a projectile of his own. The piece of meat bounced off Shane's head, and Cerberus was there to catch it between his jaws before it reached the ground.

"I pull my weight! I deserve it! How dare you hunt me down? My den is private!" Jag's golden-green eyes pinned Shane with fury.

"I just followed the fucking dog! Jesus Christ, Jag! Get over yourself!" Shane said, stepping closer until the other man rose and pointed

the metal spear at him. A pipe might work as a weapon, but it sure couldn't stab like that thing.

"Stay away." Jag squinted. "Unless you want to settle this once and for all?" He threw away his spear and squared his shoulders. A bold move considering Shane still had the pipe.

But as much as Jag annoyed him, Shane refused to break his bones with the steel, so he followed the madman's example and charged at him the moment he threw away the makeshift weapon. He'd expected to knock Jag onto the ground and be done with it, but the wiry form, clad in worn wool, twisted away from him.

Shane stumbled forward, blinking, but before he could have spun around and faced Jag, a kick in the back of the knee threw him to the ground. He yelped and rolled away just in time to avoid a punch to the side of the head. Jag's fist dashed in front of his face, and he grabbed it, using his opponent's momentum to drag him down.

This move had saved his skin many times, but his brain worked overtime, wondering whether they were alone. Prison taught him fights weren't always fair—that's how he'd gotten shanked—but the cool air blowing in his face and the barking of a dog brought him back to a reality where he climbed on top of Jag, who used his distracted state to land a punch.

Pain shot along Shane's jaw, but this wasn't the end, and he hit Jag in the stomach, causing the bastard to make a dull sound and twitch under him. But they were both determined to win this fight and rolled around to the rhythm of Cerberus's yapping. They had different strengths and body types but while Jag was leaner than Shane, his form was surprisingly strong and agile, which made the brawl even.

In clouds of vapor they both breathed out from the effort, they exchanged blows at an ever-slowing rate, because how much more pain could a man take when he didn't want to leave his opponent dead or with permanent injuries? Shane was about to rise and drag Jag by the leg when a well-timed hit with the elbow targeted his already bruised ribs, and he rolled to his back with a low moan.

Fuck. Many things could have been said about Jag, but the fucker knew how to put up a fight.

The sun was gone, obscured by a heavy, gray shroud that might drizzle them with water, but Shane didn't have the energy to look away and roll over to punch Jag back. Fortunately, the other man lay next to him, just as spent.

Neither of them moved.

Cerberus whined and came close to lick Shane's face.

Shane could've cried at how overwhelming life felt since yesterday's argument with Ros. He wouldn't though. He was a tough guy and would keep this weakness to himself.

Jag sighed. "Why didn't you escort your boy to the gate yesterday? He was afraid of me when I approached."

Shane dragged his hands down his face and took a deep breath of the cool air. "I might have... done something real shitty. It's over between me and him."

So maybe there was no point in opening up to Jag, who to Shane's knowledge was still a virgin and whose experience with relationships was narrowed to whatever his freaky nature-loving cult had practiced, but at least he wouldn't be judgy like Frank. Or so Shane hoped.

Jag turned to look at him, all too close for comfort, but he could be like that sometimes, getting into people's personal space. "So he's fair game

now?”

“The fuck? Of course not,” Shane roared and shoved his head right back to the ground.

“Why would you let him go like that then? And you say I’m the one who’s hard to understand!” Jag shook his head under Cerberus’s scrutiny. “If he’s yours then you keep him. You protect, provide, and mate with him, not leave him crying and driving off on his own! What if I wasn’t there to escort him out?” he said, as if the junkyard was overrun by rabid bears.

Shane had seen Ros shed tears, but hearing about it from someone else punched even harder, and he dragged himself into a sitting position, facing Cerberus, who stepped closer with a whine that made Shane hug his neck.

“Thanks for... taking care of that for me,” he said, because he figured the appreciation might steer Jag far away from Ros.

Poor Ros with whom Shane definitely hadn’t protected last night.

He let out a howl and slapped his own aching face first with one hand, then the other, but the sting didn’t bring much relief to his throbbing heart. As weird as Jag was, maybe he was right when it came to this? Shane had *mated* with Ros, but not only had he not taken any responsibility but had also attempted to use the poor boy as a pawn. And Ros had done nothing to deserve it.

For all Shane knew, he might not even be Ed Beck’s real kid.

Cerberus whined and pawed at Shane’s hand so he wouldn’t slap himself again, but Jag let out a howl similar to Shane’s own and sat closer. It should have annoyed Shane, made him want to scold the crazy fucker, but he couldn’t sense a false note in Jag’s behavior, nor a hint of mockery. This moment felt like a primal connection that didn’t require words. Jag was just *there*, ready to feel this pain alongside Shane.

Jag's recipe for a successful relationship sounded so silly, so simplistic, yet it was exactly what Shane longed for. Provide, protect, and mate. He couldn't imagine a happier life.

He didn't know how yet, but he would find a way to unfuck this.

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Chapter 14 – Shane

A month had passed since Shane had seen Ros or heard from him in any capacity, but the longing to reach out had never been greater. He'd been telling himself that he ought to give the boy space and let him deal with what happened, no matter how much Jag tried to convince him otherwise. But there was another side to this coin—the more time passed since Rosen had stormed out of the shipping container the more scared Shane was of seeing disgust in Rosen's blue eyes.

Jag's pseudo-tribal views were irrelevant most times, but he could have had a point about a wounded deer making for an easier chase. He'd pestered Shane about going after Ros for days after Thanksgiving, but that ship had sailed when college started its winter break.

Shane had resigned himself to staying strong and waiting instead of stalking Ros all the way to Ed Beck's home. While the vision of climbing in through Ros's window seemed romantic in his mind, he was well aware that after the way they'd last parted, sneaking up on the boy would be the worst possible move.

So he busied himself with training Cerberus, did any work Frank wanted him for and distracted himself by spending time with the new buddies he'd so far mostly ignored. Jag started growing on him once he

bonded with Cerberus, and while Dex had dirt and worms for brains, he was fun to be around. Unfortunately, the latter also had the libido of a school boy and kept flirting with Shane whenever Frank was out of sight, which was yet another reminder of how much he missed the boy.

Rosen had such a genuine smile, and had adored Shane despite them being from different worlds. How could Shane have been so dumb? He could have had his cheeks caressed by Rosen's warm thighs right now, he could be running his fingers through the long wavy hair and making out with Ros as if he were twenty again. Fate had given him another shot at the youth he'd lost to prison, and Shane had fucked it up. Getting that chance taken away hurt every day, and the only thing pushing Shane forward was the thought that he would be attempting contact again.

The cops hadn't knocked on Frank's door so far, which meant that Ros hadn't reported the attack. That had to count for *something*. Maybe not all was yet lost.

"Tell me when you're ready," Dex said and rubbed his hands together. He then lowered his sweatpants to expose the top of his underwear to the rhythm of the music beating inside the frat house. It had snowed recently, and while the thin white blanket had since thawed, the cold confined the Back-to-School party inside the building, with the exception of the poor souls who had to go out for a smoke.

"You're not here to hunt down a new dick," Shane snarled, hiding in the shadow of a large tree growing by the road.

Dex shrugged and took off the woolen hat Frank had made him wear, releasing the fluffy mop he had for hair. "Who knows what's gonna happen? Gotta be ready." He tousled his blond mane, and Shane was beginning to regret bringing him here in the first place.

He'd only invited Dex in an attempt to stick to Rosen's wishes. The boy had said he didn't want to see Shane again, but he might talk to Dex and let himself be coerced into a quick conversation outside.

Was it a misguided idea? Maybe. But Shane would consider anything that got him closer to Ros a success.

He rubbed the recently trimmed hair at the sides of his head and took a deep breath, hoping it would release the unpleasant burn in his chest and throat. It didn't work.

"*Nothing's* gonna happen before I speak with Ros. Is that clear?" he snapped, glaring at the random collection of tattoos on Dex's uncovered arm. So the guy might have come here in a car, but goosebumps were covering most of his exposed skin only minutes after stepping into the cold, because he hadn't thought about taking anything to cover himself. The fucker was useless.

"Okay, okay, I'll go find him for you," Dex waved him off and didn't wait any longer, leaving Shane by the car.

Two guys smoking cigarettes under the kitchen door awning kept glancing Shane's way as they talked, until it started pissing him off. Had Ros spread rumors about him? They couldn't have made a strong enough case to send police his way, but the intrusive stares still made him uncomfortable. Once Dex entered the frat house as if it were his own home, Shane emerged from the shadows and approached the building, which pulsed with lights and music as if the walls were about to fall down from the impact of the rhythm at their core.

Both young guys glanced his way, but then one of them patted the other on the shoulder and walked back into the kitchen where the lights turned blue. The frat boy in a puffy yellow jacket faced Shane, this time eying him from head to toe without a hint of shame.

Did he want a confrontation? Because if he did, Shane was ready to give him one.

“What are you staring at?” he asked, stepping onto the lawn and heading straight for the smoker, whose handsome, square face was well visible in the glow coming from inside.

The guy startled. “Hey, I was just wondering... You used to hang out with Rosen a lot, right?”

Shane stopped, the clouds lifting from around his head as he met the brown gaze. “Yeah.”

The frat boy took a long drag of smoke. “So are you, you know, *like* him?”

“‘Like him’?” Shane repeated, even though he knew what this was about. From up close, he could see the dark gaze sliding down his chest, but in light this low, this stranger wouldn’t get a good look at his package.

The guy huffed. “Gay? Or bi? Or...?” Was that hope in his eyes? Because he didn’t seem to speak with prejudice.

“Yeah. Why?”

He threw away the cigarette and bit his lip, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Are you, like, single now?”

Shane mentally rolled his eyes, but the question did flatter him. He opened his mouth, wanting to lie. That he and Ros were on break and would soon roll back together like a hot dog and its bun, but he stalled, realizing why Ros had been so cautious about the way they’d acted in public.

“Um... how do you know he’s gay?” The idea that Ros might have gotten together with someone else and was now out made Shane’s brain fry.

The guy chuckled. “Oh, it was this whole big thing, and his cousin told us all about it. He apparently came out over Christmas and had a massive fight at home. His dad isn’t having it. Do you have Twitter?”

Anyway, Ros hasn't come back after the break, and his room was cleared out, so... I'm guessing you're not together anymore if you don't know any of this?"

Shane would have been less stunned if this frat boy pulled a gun on him. "What? What do you mean he's not here? He—" Air got stuck in his throat until it felt as if it had turned solid, blocking proper air flow. "Where is he then?"

Fear drilled its way into Shane's brain, rendering him cold. It hit him that believing he knew where Ros was had been the only thing keeping him at peace with waiting. But it turned out that he could be anywhere, possibly homeless, and that new knowledge spread through Shane's mind like toxic rocket fuel for his need to act.

The guy shrugged as if he hadn't just dropped a bomb on Shane. "I heard he lives in town with some junkies or something. His dad cut him off. It's a whole mess."

"'With some junkies'? As in where? Aren't you guys his friends?" Shane roared and grabbed the guy, shaking him without thought. The brown eyes widened, and the frat boy went stiff as a board, as if he expected to be smacked next.

"I—maybe Brad knows? Ros always kept to himself."

As if on cue, the frat president himself stepped out with Dex, but froze at the sight of Shane.

"You didn't say *he* was with you!" Brad complained.

Dex rolled his eyes. "Chill! He's cool."

Brad stalled and looked back, as if he were about to run right back inside, but Shane grabbed the front of his T-shirt and dragged him off the steps. The gay frat brother backed away, raising his hands, but Shane didn't

care who he might report this to, because he planned to be out of here as soon as he knew where his boy was.

“Where’s Rosen?”

Brad yelped with his eyes wide. “Take it easy, man!”

Dex gently pushed on Shane’s shoulder. “We literally came here to tell you.” He glanced at the other guy. “It’s cool, really. Just spill it, and we’ll be out of your hair.”

Brad took a deep breath, and his square face relaxed. “I don’t know which apartment, but he lives in Blavis Road. House... four or five. I could find out in detail for you, Shane. You know I owe you.”

“Do. And do it *now*, because there’s hot coals under your feet, Brad,” Shane said and gave the frat president’s smooth cheek a pat that would have made most men clench their buttocks.

Brad pulled out his phone and started desperately tapping the screen while his throat covered with perspiration despite the cold.

The gay frat boy cleared his throat. “So... you’re not staying for the party?” he asked Shane as if that wasn’t obvious.

Dex grinned and offered the guy another cigarette. “He’s not, but I am.”

Of course. Dex wouldn’t miss a single dude on his unwritten quest to fuck any willing male in the area. But that wasn’t Shane’s problem. “Don’t mind me. I have everything I need,” he said and squeezed Brad’s shoulder.

The gay frat boy stalled but must have decided that the prospect of having sex with a hot idiot was more important than keeping his friend safe because he followed Dex up the steps.

Shane’s phone beeped, and Brad looked up at him with a nervous smile.

“There. I texted you the exact address. He works nights as a bartender at Paradiso. Don’t shoot the messenger. I’m not the one who kicked him out.”

Shane stared at Brad’s artificial smile as he opened the message to confirm it included the information he needed. “Okay. Remember to use rubbers,” he said, pointing his chin toward the window where several girls in sparkly bras had lined up to take selfies.

“Wow. Thanks, *Dad*.” Brad groaned when he stepped back, but Shane didn’t care about him anymore, and was off.

Dex could fend for himself anywhere, but Ros might need Shane’s protection at this very moment.

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Chapter 15 – Ros

Ros took a deep breath that did nothing to calm him down.

“Mitch, would you mind washing your dishes?” he asked, staring at the pile of filthy bowls and plates stacked high in the sink.

Being cut off came with unforeseen consequences, but while having to carefully consider the worth of every cent had been a shock, sharing an apartment with two men of whom one stank like a skunk and the other was a violent shit who considered himself a prankster was even worse than struggling with money.

The self-proclaimed Jackass II glared at Ros from the sofa that looked as if it had been half-digested by a dragon and shrugged. “I *would* mind,” he said and laughed as if that was the funniest thing ever. Maybe it was when your brain had holes obtained by years of drug and alcohol overuse.

A part of Ros believed this was his punishment for selling Pete the pills that killed him.

“*This* is the reason why we have cockroaches,” Ros said after taking a deep breath, because he could have sworn something small passed across the kitchen counter at the speed of a cheetah. A violent shudder ran through

his body when he remembered the first time he'd seen one of the disgusting black beetles and realized this would be his life from now on.

In filth. With walls the color of diarrhea and windows that failed to keep out the cold. With bugs and flimsy locks that his other roommate, Jason, could open with a credit card.

Harlene had been gracious enough to let him stay in her dorm room, but someone had reported the double occupation, and Ros couldn't have burdened her with his issues any longer.

He also didn't want to ask his mother for help, since they weren't close and she lived all the way in Montana. If things got dire, he'd reach out, but Dad hadn't left her with much after their divorce years ago, so until things got unbearable, he didn't want to ask for help.

So here he was, staring at the guy who thought cutting off a chunk of Ros's hair had been a prank for the ages.

"So? Are you afraid they're gonna burrow inside your pussy, or something?" Mitch's droopy eyes rolled as he rubbed his stubbly chin. Spread on the sofa in a tracksuit that had a massive red stain at the front since yesterday, he was the embodiment of sloth and proud of it too.

Ros's shoulders fell. "You're really fine with this shit?" He'd promised himself not to be confrontational since his last argument with Mitch ended up with bruises and a cigarette burn on his forearm, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut when the damn house felt like a biohazard that would eventually take him down.

"Yeah, now shut up. I'm trying to watch something," Mitch hissed, looking up from his cell phone. He'd trashed the TV two nights ago and hadn't yet replaced it, but clearly there was no rush to do *anything* in his world.

“He squeaking again?” Jason asked as his feet thumped down the creaking stairs. Ros flinched with each of his steps, because the wood was so old he feared it might break under the guy’s weight, tearing flesh and breaking bone.

Ros pushed back his hair, still not used to the fact that it barely reached his shoulders now. In his former life, he would have gone to a hairdresser’s, but beauty treatments of any kind were beyond his budget, so he’d settled on chopping some of his locks here and there to even things out after they’d been hacked off with kitchen scissors.

He wished he could take more shifts at the gas station and save up to move somewhere nicer, but the only ones available at the moment overlapped with his bartending job, which left him trapped with the two shitheads, unless he’d rather live in the street.

At this point, he considered going back to dealing, but Shane and his elusive friend had been his only contacts, and his one sales outlet—the frat. What was he to do? Approach the local biker gang and ask if they needed recruits? Just thinking about it had his stomach clenching with anxiety.

“Yeah, he’s runnin’ his mouth,” Mitch said as the living cloud of stench entered the living room carrying a massive blanket that had seen better days and probably served as a home for a whole herd of fleas. For whatever reason, Jason favored massive hoodies that he wore for days on end, claiming they weren’t yet dirty enough to wash, and the one he had on at the moment had been his outfit of choice for the past week. If he just changed the T-shirts worn underneath...

“I wasn’t saying anything,” Ros grumbled, turning to the dishes and wondering whether he should wash them all or resign himself to eating off paper plates in his room.

The loud farting sound made them all stall. But as Ros looked around, weirded out, Mitch and Jason both broke down with laughter.

“Just look at his face!” Mitch rumbled and presented his open palm toward Jason, who gave him a high-five. “It’s not you, prince. It’s the new doorbell!”

Wow.

“I guess I’ll get that.”

Anything to escape their presence. If it wasn’t snowing outside, he would have just sat on a bench and pretended his life hadn’t gone down the drain. Maybe he’d have even gone to a park and drawn in his sketchbook, which was something he hadn’t done in a week. As much pleasure as art had always given him, it required mental energy, and Rosen’s was permanently depleted.

Harlene wouldn’t have come here unannounced, so it was surely one of Mitch or Jason’s buddies, but maybe a guest would take their attention off Rosen at least?

He dragged his feet, trying to ignore the way the sticky floor clung to his trainers, but in the end reached the door and opened it wide.

The first thing he saw were motorcycle boots and washed-out denim pants, but before he could have filled his lungs with air, a familiar voice spoke.

“What happened to your hair?”

Ros stepped back so fast he ended up stumbling on the wall. He should have slammed the door not backed off, but Shane already entered and captured one of the strands that now barely reached Rosen’s shoulders.

He smelled of spice and wood. Like Rosen’s first time, and his handsome face was pinched in a deep frown as he regarded Ros from head to toe.

Ros had to force himself to breathe, because he still had nightmares about the last time they'd met. He'd never been so betrayed in his life, and in this moment even Mitch and Jason's presence felt safer than Shane's.

"It's a long story. W-what do you want?"

Shane locked his lips but didn't back off and instead just drilled his green eyes into Ros until his heart beat so fast it was choking him. "Brad told me you're here. And... your dad threw you out?"

Ros sighed, making sure Shane wasn't close enough to grab him. He could only hope his asshole roommates weren't listening. "It's none of your business," he said, though a part of him was still desperate for it to *be* Shane's business. Exhaustion had weakened his defenses, and despite their traumatic fight still being a thorn at the back of his mind, Shane's true colors were a blur after a month.

Shane swallowed and hung his head but didn't try to approach. "I'm sorry. About everything," he forced out and looked up, his neck tensing.

How was Ros to know if this wasn't another lie, another way to get to him? "My dad doesn't care what I do anymore. There's no reason for you to pursue me."

"Come on, butterfly! Show 'im off!" Jason yelled from the living room, making Ros boil on the inside. Of course those fuckers would eavesdrop on his private conversations, on the lookout for yet more reasons to mock the guy who was too polite, too clean, to fit in with their world. They'd never do that if Shane stayed.

Ros wished he could just forget about Shane's betrayal and feel safe rolling into those warm arms.

Shane's brows rose as he stared down the corridor, but he quickly returned his attention to Ros. "I'm here for you, not your father."

“And I’m supposed to believe that because I’m a dumbass who already fell for all your lies once?”

Shane exhaled and punched the wall on the other side of the hallway so hard it left a dent. Not that it mattered when there were several other holes all around the house. “Look, I wanted to give it time. But then I came to the frat house, and they told me you came out over Christmas—why? You didn’t plan to do that until you were done with college!” he exclaimed, spinning around as if the violent outburst meant nothing.

“Because I want nothing to do with him! I’m done living on other people’s terms.” Ros took another step back, even though it brought him closer to Mitch and Jason. His outburst earned him a whistle from the living room.

“Won’t you shut up?” Shane snapped.

Ros gritted his teeth. “No, they won’t because they’re fucking assholes,” he yelled with his roommates as the intended audience. “I’d invite you to my room, but you know what? I don’t want you in my room!” *Because I might fall for you and your lies again.*

“Oooh! I hear you, princess!” Mitch yelled. “I’ll make sure to give you a closer shave next time.”

Ros froze in terror when the sharp sound of the blades cutting through his hair stabbed through his mind in a brief yet debilitating flashback. He only snapped out of the shock when Shane stalked into his personal space, with his rich scent and obvious strength. He was a monster, but having a monster on his side was so tempting right now.

Shane grabbed a strand of Ros’s shortened hair. “Does he mean—”

Ros looked away, because he was dangerously close to tears when he thought back to the violation he’d suffered. Many would have said it was *just hair*. But for him, that long mane had been much more. His pride and

joy. The first symbol of his rebellion against Father, and something he considered a part of his personal charm, taken away by force. For the sake of a sick joke.

“It’s not your problem,” he muttered, but Shane was already in bulldozer mode and picked up Ros’s forearm, staring at the bruise around his wrist and the cigarette burn Mitch had ‘pranked’ him with.

“Was it those clowns?”

Ros took a shivery breath and nodded, biting his lips to fight the tears pushing at his eyelids. He’d promised himself not to cry over this again. “I’ll find a way to move soon anyway.”

“Come on,” Shane said and dragged him toward the noise, straight into the living room furnished with dirty old sofas and trash. The glow of the lamp blinded him as they entered, but Mitch’s laughter made him fight through the discomfort and look up.

“That your boyfriend?” Jason asked with his mouth full of the pasta he’d left on the counter over twenty-four hours ago. Who knew? If Ros was lucky, maybe he’d go down with food poisoning.

“I am,” Shane declared in a low voice. “Who did this?” he asked, raising Ros’s limp arm. “And this?” He touched the shortened hair.

Ros’s face went aflame, but he didn’t have the strength to protest.

“How come it’s the first time I see you then?” Jason asked with a shrug.

Mitch eyed Shane with a bit more caution.

“He got what he deserved for being a pain in the ass,” he said in an even tone.

“Oh really?” Shane asked, resting his hands on his hips, but his restlessness was making Ros stiffen with worry. “What is it that he did, Whatsyourname?”

Mitch introduced himself and got up, all confrontational. There was no reality in which this situation could have a good outcome. “It’s my house, and no pampered poodle will be telling me when to do my laundry or wash my dishes.” He glared at Ros with a promise of violence, but Shane was nothing like Ros and neither broad stances nor mean words could intimidate him into silence.

Mitch’s posture changed the moment Shane stepped forward. He reached into his pocket, but wasn’t fast enough, torn whether he should keep the threatening act or submit to the larger predator. Shane grabbed Mitch by his greasy hair and pressed an open pocket knife to his throat in a way so confident everyone in the room realized it was no empty threat.

Ros yelped and backed into the wall, but he wasn't sorry for Mitch. The fucker was getting what he deserved, and in this moment, Ros couldn't find it in himself to hate Shane. The same violence Shane had wielded against him, was exciting when exerted in righteous revenge. Ros wanted Mitch to be afraid for once, and to know that Shane did this for Ros’s benefit, unwound a knot in his heart.

“What the fuck?” Jason squealed, dropping his plastic plate to the floor, but Shane ignored him and shoved Mitch to his knees. A loop of yellow rope appeared in his hand out of nowhere, and he pushed it over Mitch’s head before tightening the noose. When he stepped toward the kitchen, Ros’s tormentor rolled to his stomach and grabbed at the noose, fighting for breath.

“Who’s the poodle now, huh?” Shane roared.

“G-get the f-fuck off!” Mitch struggled to speak but still writhed in the hold. He looked to Jason for help, but the guy retreated into the kitchen and wouldn’t move an inch.

Figured. Jason was a man who only picked on those he was sure he could win against, and usually egged on Mitch while keeping his hands clean. He wouldn't challenge Shane even if the person being threatened were his own mother.

Ros had never been a bloodthirsty person, yet seeing Mitch dragged over the dirty floor like the piece of trash he was, awoke a new side of him. Now he knew how Ancient Romans had felt in the circus, watching Christians being ripped apart by wild beasts. And he liked it.

"Should have listened to your own advice and backed off from my boy, but you haven't, have you? It's now my time to have some fun," Shane hissed, pulling a frantic Mitch by the improvised leash. Jason moved along the kitchen counter, his face already shiny with sweat, but Shane spotted him before he could have made a run for it. "I'm not done with you either. Stay still if you don't want to end up like him."

Ros shouldn't condone this. Shane had proven himself deceptive and ruthless, yet Ros's face heated more than ever when he watched Shane avenging him. This was the confidence Ros had fallen for. The Shane who'd followed him into his room and taken his virginity after barely exchanging names.

When Mitch pawed at the counter next to him in search of a weapon, Shane grabbed a dirty steak knife from the sink and plunged it through the fucker's hand, pinning it to the wood.

Ros might have felt the spark of satisfaction at Mitch's scream all the way in his balls.

"He cut my hair off when I was sleeping," he said in a hollow voice.

"Oh really?" Shane asked, smashing Mitch's face against the pizza box on the counter. "Maybe we should cut off his balls while he's *not* sleeping?"

“Hey, man... It was just a joke,” Jason muttered, but stayed put as he’d been told.

“A f-fucking p-prank!” Mitch choked out when Shane gave his throat enough slack.

“Do you see me laughing?” Shane asked, glaring at Jason, whose legs shook so violently he looked as if he might drop to the floor at any second.

For a terrible moment, Ros couldn’t breathe from the shock of it all, but then Shane twisted the knob switching on one of the burners on the gas stove and pulled Mitch’s face over the fire. The odor of burning hair filled the whole interior, and Mitch shrieked, thrashing in Shane’s hold.

“Are we laughing *now*?” Shane roared before tossing the fucker to the floor, where Mitch frantically rolled around until the flames died.

Ros crossed his arms on his chest to keep from trembling. He would have watched Mitch getting his whole ear burned off. And then fucked Shane’s brains out.

“I’m sorry, okay?” Mitch yelled, patting his head as if were still aflame, all jittery as he crawled into the corner to join the other cockroaches.

Jason raised his hands. “Won’t happen again.”

“It won’t because you’re both taking your shit and moving out,” Shane roared before stalling with his mouth slightly open as he glanced Ros’s way. “Unless... Ros wants to go instead...?”

This was the time to come back to reality. Shane’s offer was one Ros couldn’t take. “I can’t afford anything else,” he mumbled.

“You could take my room,” Shane said, as if he’d been prepared for that question.

After this not-so-gallant yet glorious outburst of violence, Ros wouldn't even consider humiliating Shane by telling him they weren't getting back together in front of these two maggots. But that didn't mean Ros would allow him back into his life like some sucker.

"Thanks, I'm staying."

Shane's lips pressed together, but he didn't miss a beat and glared at the frightened men. "So you go. Pack up, or my dog's gonna have some free meat to feed on."

Shane had told Ros he'd never killed anyone, but *this* threat didn't sound empty either. Better to not overthink it.

Jason, who usually slept until midday and didn't rush a single activity, was out of the door as if he were competing in the Olympics, while Mitch moved like an injured wolf, but his muzzle remained shut as he disappeared down the corridor.

Ros took a long breath and leaned against the counter, suddenly weak in the knees. "That was amazing, but I still hate you. I told you to stay away."

Shane's features twisted as he contemplated Ros's words, but he must have come to some sort of conclusion, because he took a deep breath and stepped toward him, one hand resting on the edge of the counter, right by Ros's hip. "I can't."

Goosebumps travelled all the way up Ros's arm, as if those thick fingers stroked him, but he wouldn't crack. "There's a hundred pretty boys out there for you. You don't need me anymore. My dad hates me, so there's nothing for you to gain here."

"I made a mistake, okay?" Shane snapped but didn't attempt to touch Ros despite standing so close. His tongue slid from between his lips and

licked along their seam. “I can’t take it back, but I miss you,” he said with intense green eyes pinned to Rosen’s

“You do?” Rosen asked as bile gathered at the back of his throat. “You can always rewatch that video. You know, the one where I’m begging you to let me go.” He didn’t want to remember. He shouldn’t even want to look at Shane, yet he stood in place, inhaling Shane’s scent, because it brought him peace regardless of all logic.

This man was a human wrecking ball. Was it fucked up that Ros found it so hard to resist him?

“I obviously deleted it!” Shane closed his eyes and took a deep breath before leaning in to stare into Ros’s eyes as if he expected them to reveal the truth about Rosen’s feelings. “I’m not that guy, okay? I hated how you treated me when your dad was around, and I just—I don’t fucking know what I was thinking!”

Even though the video incriminated Shane and didn’t show anything Ros should’ve been ashamed of, it brought him relief to know that it didn’t exist anymore. He’d had a tumultuous month to cool off and focus on other things, but now that the evidence of what happened was gone, it brought him a step closer to forgetting about it. Life was armed with sharp blades that kept him distracted, but when everything felt helpless, or shortly before sleep, when his self-control weakened, he’d think about the Shane he thought he’d known—the one who might be rough around the edges but had a good heart beating in that muscular chest. Too bad that man wasn’t real.

“I came out because I couldn’t stand Dad’s hypocrisy anymore. It didn’t matter whether you were in the picture or not, or if I hated you for lying to me. I believe my dad did what you said he did, and I don’t want anything to do with a man like that. I can see you’re trying to do *something*

here, but I don't know how I could ever trust you again. I don't know why you're here."

Shane exhaled. Looked away. And then leaned in, pressing his soft lips to Ros's.

His toes curled, the hairs on his nape stood to attention, and Ros instinctively put his fingertips on Shane's chest. He'd missed this so bad. The Shane from before the whole mess. When he closed his eyes, the bitter memory of Shane pressing him into a dirty mattress in a cold container—

Ros pushed him away. "You should go," he mumbled and slid along the counter to create more distance. If he'd learned one thing about himself this year, it was that he was stupid and naive. His instincts would fail him and needed to be countered with reason.

He half-expected Shane to chase after him, but he remained where he was, his forehead cloudy. "Fine. But I'll be in touch. Give me the contact to your landlord? I want to make sure you don't have to live with those kinds of lowlifes," Shane said firmly.

Ros bit his lip. He should reject the offer and make this a clean break instead of letting someone else handle his problems, but some days, he felt so lonely in his new reality, that he caved and gave Shane what he wanted.

And secretly, he did look forward to Shane being in touch even if he wouldn't say it.

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Chapter 16 – Shane

The bar Ros worked at was a real hellhole, and while the shortened hair made him look less out of place among its clientele, Shane still made sure to be around each evening, in case someone picked on him. The owner did keep a shotgun in the back, but he wasn't always there and, according to Ros, often was just as drunk as the patrons and didn't make for reliable security.

So like every night since he'd crashed back into Rosen's life, Shane rode up to the old brick building that housed Paradiso the dive bar, and entered its dark interior through a door plastered with layers of concert posters. He was glad Ros had enough sense to take the big tips Shane always left him, because the position he was in didn't leave much room for pride.

Ros was behind the counter as usual, and thanks to the owner pinching pennies on everything but the heating, he was able to work in a T-shirt despite the snow outside. Shane could still not get over the fact that someone had the nerve to cut Ros's lush hair against his will, but the boy was cute with the little ponytail as well. Shane did worry whether he was eating enough though, because he seemed skinnier than on the day they'd met.

Rosen hadn't been happy with Shane's visits at first, but he'd gotten used to them and nodded as Shane took a seat on one of the green bar stools. On a slow night, Rosen would linger close by, eager for Shane's attention regardless of what he declared, but he was talking with a customer, so Shane left him to it. After all, he had all night to ask for a drink of his own.

"I know of a place down the road from me that's for rent," the stranger said to Ros, which meant that this conversation has been going on for a while, because Ros wouldn't have revealed that he was on the lookout for a new apartment otherwise.

Shane ended up paying the landlord rent for both the assholes who left, adding a little extra to keep Ros in the dark about it.

Ros smiled and waved it off. "Nah, it's fine, Bill, I'm trying to save up as much as I can."

The customer was a burly redhead with a big beard and lots of freckles and wore a plaid green shirt with sleeves rolled up to show off the tattoos under lots of ginger hair.

He seemed harmless enough, but then again, Shane knew from experience that the neatest-looking people might attack your underbelly when you least expected it, so he remained wary and helped himself to a bowl of pretzels someone hadn't finished.

It was a peaceful midweek evening, and only a couple of tables were occupied by regulars whom Shane was already familiar with. But the redhead? He was new and therefore required more attention.

"You said you're a painter, right?" Bill asked, licking off the beer foam that clung to his beard. "I've got this cabinet I bought at a garage sale, and it could use a new coat of paint."

Ros leaned against the counter, polishing a glass. "I'm not that kind of painter, but I could give it a shot."

"Would you come over to see it? I'm not that good at choosing colors."

Shane's head jerked up, and he dug his nails into his denim-clad thigh, awaiting Ros's answer, but his throat already felt thick with fury. Was this guy clueless about Ros's sexuality, or this obvious in his covert propositioning?

Ros hummed. "I could do next Friday."

Bill smirked, and all of Shane's body hair bristled when the fucker reached out to cup Ros's elbow with one massive, freckled paw. "You could come tonight after work. I could wait up and give you a ride."

"Will you let go of him, or should I break all your fingers?" Shane asked quietly enough that his words remained indiscernible for most of the patrons. But the country music flowing from the speakers wouldn't keep his opinion secret from Ros and Bill, who turned his head Shane's way.

He kept up the eye contact. "You only just came in, friend. Maybe focus on your pretzels."

"It's fine." Ros rolled his eyes, but when he tried to step away, Bill held onto his arm, as if their deal had already been sealed.

Shane's head filled with steam as he stepped into the fucker's personal space. "Am I not being clear?"

"What is your problem, huh?" Bill turned to him, still not letting go of Ros.

"Maybe *everyone* should calm down," Ros said, but Shane could barely hear his voice as he jabbed his head, headbutting Bill so hard stars exploded right back at him, shimmering at the edges of his vision.

“The fuck?” Bill yelled and grabbed the front of Shane’s T-shirt, but at least that meant his slimy paw let go of Ros. Just the thought of Ros going *anywhere* with this fucker had Shane’s brain burning up with enough jealousy to cook the world.

When Bill pulled, Shane was ready for him, but he was also aware of the rapid squeak of chair legs. Someone would soon try to intervene, but he didn’t care, and spun around, smashing his elbow into the side of Bill’s face and sending it at the counter. The hollow thud of his skull hitting the edge would have made most men cringe. But not Shane. He’d given the fucker a chance to get away, but he hadn’t taken it. Bill would be at fault when it came to whatever misery befell him.

It didn’t take a genius to see that despite being a big guy, Bill didn’t know the first thing about fighting. He grabbed his beer and tossed it at Shane. Some of it splashed him, but Shane ducked fast enough to avoid the glass.

Just as he was about to return the favor, Ros jumped over the counter and stood between them, one hand pressed to Shane’s chest.

“Stop it or I’ll call the cops!” A bluff obvious to Shane, but maybe not to Bill.

Whether Ros was all talk or not, the warmth of his palm calmed the beast raging inside Shane, and time stood still as Shane met the brilliantly blue eyes. They were so clear. Like a tropical ocean, and just as warm.

Bill moved so fast Shane didn’t see him coming, but when the meaty guy pushed Rosen his way, Shane focused on catching the boy before he fell, and didn’t see the punch coming at his eye. Bill’s fist struck Shane’s cheek so hard he would have dropped even without Ros’s weight toppling him.

The bright lights above the bar counter spun, but Shane had good enough reflexes to stiffen his neck before hitting the floor. The back of his head did meet the tiles, but much less violently than it would have otherwise. When Ros landed on him a split second later and knocked the air out of his lungs, the pain radiating all over Shane's chest suggested he might have cracked a rib.

Cushioning Ros's fall would have been worth it though.

Shane was ready to act, to get up and fight Bill, but the guy was being pulled away by several other patrons despite his angry yelling.

A woman scooted next to Shane and touched his head with a cool hand. Her mini dress was made of distressed leather and showed a sliver of underwear. Was it wrong that she reminded Shane of his mother when she was in one of her better moods? "Are you okay? I don't see any blood. Oh, never mind, now I do," she added when Shane felt a hot dribble from his nose.

"Fuck! What an asshole!" Ros rolled off, his gaze soft as he took in Shane.

Despite the pain, Shane couldn't help feeling giddy that the boy had taken his side even though Shane had been the one to start the confrontation. Just like when he'd burned Mitch and Ros thanked him for it. Jag was right about one thing. Protecting felt better than attacking. And now that he had blood to show for his chivalrous behavior, Ros's confrontational attitude toward him had dispersed. He did care.

"Was right for you to step in. Some men can't distinguish young boys from girls when they're drunk," the woman said, adjusting her fluffy blonde locks.

Bill was still yelling something in the street, but Ros leaned over Shane, panting as if he were expecting to see missing teeth. But all was well

with Shane.

Ros cleared his throat. “Yeah. Thanks for that. Come on, you’re already swelling. Let’s put some ice on that.”

Shane scowled and rolled his shoulders. The instincts he’d learned from a young age told him to wipe off the dust clinging to his clothes and get up, as if nothing happened, because weakness was what lured predators. But if he did that, Ros would no longer have an excuse to touch him, so he made a little groan and rubbed his head instead.

“What happened here?” asked another woman when the blonde lady was lured away by her two friends. This one was Ros’s age and dressed in all black, with an extremely short fringe and old-timey makeup with red lips as its main feature.

“There was a scuffle, and the other guy got violent, but he’s gone now,” Ros lied without batting an eyelash, still petting Shane’s side in a way that felt familiar and tender, and was rocket fuel for the fire of Shane’s hope. “Can you take over at the bar?”

The girl rolled her eyes, but looked around and shrugged. “Yeah, fine. But you’ll cover for me if the creep with the Cadillac T-shirt comes back. Even if I call on your day off.”

Shane assumed bartending staff, especially in a hellhole like this one, would be more used to dealing with advances from rowdy patrons, but he didn’t care what the girl’s story was when Ros was there, touching him, and ready to assess Shane for injuries. Would he check for bruises under his clothes too?

He whimpered when a lock of shortened hair brushed against his cheekbone but rose as Ros prompted him with a pull at the arm. “Yes. I think... I think ice would help.”

“Come with me,” Ros said and pushed his shoulder against Shane, as if he expected having to carry some of his weight.

This had been far from Shane’s worst fight, and he was perfectly capable of walking on his own, but if pity made the boy touch him, he’d milk the hell out of it. He could sense the remaining patrons watching his shameful exit, but the unease Shane felt over showing weakness was alleviated the moment Ros led him through the door behind the bar counter.

Away from prying eyes, he wrapped his arm around Shane’s waist in a more intimate gesture that Shane wanted to last forever.

“What were you thinking?”

Shane rolled his eyes, but didn’t reject the help, and put his arm on Rosen’s shoulder as they entered a small kitchen that smelled of burnt fat and vegetables that had been left outside for a bit too long. Paradiso didn’t serve any hot food, but maybe the staff used this place to prepare their meals?

“He was coming onto you.”

“Yeah, and I would have handled it, though—” Ros exhaled, looking away. “I wasn’t expecting it, actually. In a place like this, men don’t usually hit on me. Sit here.” Ros pulled a little stool closer to a steel counter that had fingerprints on it but seemed clean otherwise.

“He was being pushy,” Shane insisted, but parked his ass on the hard seat and watched Rosen’s pert butt twitch under the denim when he turned to the fridge.

“Well, some people are like that, aren’t they? Pushy fuckers who follow you to your room and give you the best night of your life, only to then turn into monsters.”

“Fair. I deserve that. I’m not saying that didn’t happen. What I need to know is how the fuck can I make up for it?” Shane snapped, his patience

rubbed raw. Whenever Ros said things like that, Shane felt as though he was about to fall down a shaft with no end. No solution. No redemption. And it fucking sucked.

Ros grabbed a bag filled with ice cubes, wrapped it in a towel and even though he could have just handed it to Shane, he pressed it to his swelling face himself. He was so close Shane could have pulled him forward and put his cheek against the boy's hot stomach. But he paced himself. This time he needed to think of future outcomes, not immediate pleasure.

Ros's eyes were like ice needles pushing into Shane's flesh. "Why do you want to? Be honest with me. So I was fun in bed and I'm your type. But you wouldn't be here if it was just that, so I'm listening."

Shane had been asking himself the same thing. Why be so hung up on Rosen when there was no shortage of pretty boys with willing mouths and asses on Grindr? The answer lay in the gentle way Ros held the ice against his face. In the way he'd taken Shane's side during the confrontation with Bill and lied for him. In the way he'd sought Shane out for Thanksgiving, coming to him, all trusting and in need of affection.

He might have the prettiest face with big blue eyes and a large nose Shane loved to kiss, but his appearance held barely any meaning in the equation of why Shane so desperately wanted him back. Ros *cared* for him in a way not even Frank did, and had been so ready to accept Shane's baggage after finding out about his time in prison and what Shane did for a living. It had been reckless of him, and the very reason why Ros had fallen into Shane's trap, but if Rosen decided to take Shane back, he'd always have someone to protect him from the fallout of naivete.

Rosen's conviction to stay afloat without Daddy's money was admirable, but he wasn't cut out for a life this rough, and he needed Shane's

help more than his pride allowed him to admit. Or maybe it was Shane who truly needed him?

Love and sex in prison was always transactional, yet Ros had given himself without question, expecting nothing beyond the pleasure of Shane's company. He'd been fearless in the way he'd embraced everything Shane was and made Shane feel he hadn't completely fucked up his life. That Shane still had everything ahead of him.

Now, he craved to return the favor, and wanted Ros to need him just as much as it was the other way around.

"When you're with me, I feel like I have a future."

Hope burned bright in his heart when Rosen met his gaze, eager to soak in every word, like the cutest little sponge. "What does that mean? I'm not exactly the catch of the century anymore."

Shane frowned, holding the cold pack to his head as he focused on the boy standing in the middle of the dingy kitchen. His moral compass used to spin aimlessly in a world without a true north, but that had changed. While he still often strayed off the right path, the needle always ended up guiding him toward Ros. In the past, he'd have rejected that trajectory but what was freedom if not the ability to make choices that felt *right*?

"You're kidding me, right? I don't need your money. I just want you back with me. Looking at me like I'm... just a guy, not scum who's wasted most of his adult life already."

Did Ros know that the touch of his fingers alleviated Shane's pain in a way no painkiller could?

"You seem to have your life put together."

"Fake it 'til you make it, right?" Shane whispered through a throat that suddenly felt tight. He'd expected Ros to look away, but when he

didn't, Shane grasped his hand and squeezed it, staring straight into those pretty eyes. "My life is a mess. I have no aim. No future. I'm no one."

"You're someone to me," Ros whispered, curling his fingers around Shane's thick paw.

Shane's throat dried, and he pulled the slender hand to his lips, kissing each knuckle with the reverence of a believer faced with his God. His heart beat faster, thudding inside his ribcage until he grew hot. "I did a shitty thing. And I tried to use you instead of seeing you for who you are. And now... I don't know what to do, because I miss you more than I missed freedom in prison."

Ros sighed, and when his hand slid up the back of Shane's neck. He'd never been treated with such tenderness. Even before doing time. The touch stripped away Shane's invisible armor, until vulnerable flesh was all that was left, but he still craved more with every inch of his being.

"I miss you too," Ros confessed. "It's tough out here on my own. I'm too ashamed of where I live to even invite Harlene over, so we're not in touch much. It feels lonely"

Shane's stomach twisted in sympathy, but he longed for more of this connection, and if opening up had already lured Ros closer to him, then maybe he should offer the boy more? "I was always ashamed of my home when I was younger. It didn't even have a real door after Dad's friend broke it."

Ros hesitated, but then slowly straddled Shane's lap and sat on his legs. Those blue eyes were like blades about to dissect Shane's soul, and for the first time, he was not afraid of their scrutiny.

"You never spoke much about your family. Did you lose touch because of prison? You said you lived with Frank before that already," Ros

started, and when he didn't finish his thought, Shane knew it was time to pick it up.

He shrugged, looking away despite the urgent need for Ros to see him. Pity might get him closer to this sweet, gentle boy, but the shame of his past was a rusty nail stuck in flesh and poisoning it even after such a long time. "They were...we were never close. They had their thing, I had mine."

It was a wonder Shane hadn't fallen prey to the same addiction that had consumed both of his parents, but then again he'd always been more into motorcycles than artificially changing his reality.

"It must have been hard on you, especially when you were younger," Ros said, and even though thinking back to the past hurt, the sweet kiss he planted on Shane's ear alleviated some of its burden.

"They lived in their own world. Not sure why they kept me around, to be honest. If I was a girl, they might have sold me off to someone. But since I was a boy... well, maybe it didn't occur to them," Shane whispered, staring at Ros's bobbing Adam's apple. Its rhythmic motion calmed all his sorrows, but since he'd gotten pushed away the last time he tried to take a bite of that delicious throat, he stayed put, just enjoying the warmth of Ros's attention.

The boy blinked and hid his face from view by pressing his cheek to the side of Shane's head. "I'm so sorry. It feels like my current struggle's nothing in comparison, but I still can't help feeling sorry for myself. I just feel so alone in all this."

It felt so good. As if he'd become Ros's safe haven, and he wasn't about to mess it up with more of his own dirt. "We're not comparing wounds here. And you don't have to be alone," Shane whispered, pulling

Ros's hand to his chest. It was meant to comfort the boy but made his own head spin instead.

Ros's lips trembled when he pulled away just enough to look into Shane's eyes. "I feel like such a dumbass for wanting you after what happened. You hurt me so much, but you're the only one I feel safe with."

Shane's heart throbbed with warmth incomparable to anything he'd ever experienced, but as he was about to lean in for a kiss, the dampness shining in Ros's eyes made him stall.

He couldn't believe he was doing this, but the prospect of taking a shortcut back into Ros's arms after the shit he'd pulled on him seemed like the wrong choice. So he'd be good, and supportive, and earn back his affection the hard way. "You're right. I proved I'm not someone worthy of trust. But I'll show you I've changed," he added with more force.

Ros leaned in until his face was barely an inch away, and blew hot air at Shane's cheek when he spoke. "Will you let me get to know the real you? One step at a time."

Shane's breath caught, and he stroked the backs of his fingers along Ros's smooth jaw. "What if I'm not sure I like the real me? I want to be someone you like to be around."

Ros cocked his head. "I'm changing a lot too. It's okay to become something new. It's your mind that's the prison," he said and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead.

Sparks exploded all over Shane, and he let out a soft gasp, leaning closer to his lover's warm body.

"I want to take care of you."

Ros let out a deep sigh. "Is it bad that I want to let you? I'm just so tired, you know. All the time. I don't even have the time or energy to make art anymore."

“It is a bit dumb of you to trust me again,” Shane admitted with a chuckle. He couldn’t help but flinch at the very idea of Ros no longer being able to create his beautiful sculptures. So maybe it was easier to be artistic without the threat of violence and hunger always lurking around the corner, but it wasn’t Ros’s fault that he’d been born into a family that offered him safety. That should have been the baseline for anyone, so the fact that Shane had such a different childhood experience could only be blamed on his useless parents. “But if you do, I’ll do everything I can to prove that I can be worth something too.”

Shane would bury another body with his bare hands for the little smile it got him. “Okay, so how do we do this? I wanna take it slow and figure it all out first.”

Was this really his chance?

Shane stiffened, because for all his sulking attempts, deep down he hadn’t believed Ros would be this generous, and he didn’t want to fuck it up.

“We’ll get Frank’s truck and collect your things. And then you can have my room,” he uttered with a soft exhale, cautious when Ros’s brows lowered. Had he said something wrong?

“Are you sure you’re fine with that? The sofa’s out there in the living room...”

“Yeah, that’s where I’m gonna sleep,” Shane said quickly, before covering his awkwardness with a fake cough. “I barely have any stuff of my own, so I can easily live out of a duffel bag. You’ll be safe, and fed, and you can focus on your art. No pressure. About anything.”

Ros’s widening smile made his heart beat so fast he knew he’d said the right thing. “I’d really like that, Shane. And we can figure things out from there.”

There was no kiss to finalize their new agreement, but that was fine. Shane could now keep an eye on Ros, make him happy, and eat breakfast with him each day. It was already much more than he'd hoped for.

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Chapter 17 – Ros

“They’re not for you!”

Shane’s yelling startled Ros out of sleep. Just as promised, Shane had given Ros his room, and while Ros was still uncertain of how things would progress between them, he was about to greet the first day in his new home. He’d probably never forget the fear and regret of the night when the man he’d fallen for had betrayed his trust, but he wanted to believe the change in Shane.

“Just make enough for everyone! Jesus!” Dex complained loudly enough for Ros to hear through the wall.

The room felt cold but while it snowed outside and the wind whistled at the crack in the window, the hoodie Shane offered Ros to sleep in had kept him cozy under the comforter all night long. It had lulled him to sleep with Shane’s pleasant, earthy scent.

The room was narrow, with barely any space left to walk along the side of the bed, but Ros hadn’t yet spotted a single cockroach, and the bedding smelled of copious amounts of fabric softener.

For the first time since leaving the frat house, he’d slept soundly, without the fear of being attacked or robbed. And while he was groggy after being jerked awake, he barely even remembered falling asleep last night.

“I’m not cooking for your ass! When have you done something for me, huh?” Shane roared.

“I help you! I give you advice!” Jag roared, and Ros had to snicker to himself, because he had no idea what kind of advice someone like Jag could have offered.

He put on a pair of sweatpants and walked out, feeling like one of those wrinkly dogs with too much skin on them. But the outfit was cozy at least.

The first thing he saw in the open-plan kitchen with mismatched cupboards was Jag sitting on the floor between Frank’s legs while the older man tidied his hair with a wooden comb. The towel wrapped around Jag’s hips didn’t hide much, so Ros looked up, dragging his gaze up the unexpectedly wiry body that he’d so far only seen wrapped in loose-fitting clothes.

The interior smelled of coffee and pancakes, one of which was already half-eaten in Jag’s hand. Dex, who drank from a mug in just a pair of white, loose-fitting boxer shorts, saw Ros first and winked at him while Shane groaned, moving the pan over the stove.

“You took the best one, Jag. What the fuck’s wrong with you...”

In comparison to Rosen’s chilly room, this space was boiling with heat generated by both the stove and the fireplace in the corner, which explained why even Frank had chosen to wear a thin tank top that revealed his firm, dusky arms.

Jag shrugged before tearing off a chunk of the pancake as if he were a child playing the role of a caveman. “You can wrestle me for it. We’ll see who wins.”

Dex rolled his eyes. “Nobody’s fighting you over food you’ve already licked.”

Ros's face was already flushing from the unexpected heat, so he took off Shane's hoodie, uncovering his own T-shirt. "Good morning. Is it always so busy here?"

Frank smiled at him, looking up from Jag's head, where he was creating a parting in the thick locks. "We don't often have breakfast together, but for *some* reason Shane's decided to grace us with pancakes, so no one wanted to miss that."

Dex smirked at Ros, leaning against the counter in a pose clearly meant as seductive. "Wonder why."

Shane spun around, his eyes wide as if he'd been caught with a nasty porn mag. He held a spatula and wore a plain black T-shirt that he'd tucked into his pants at the front and left loose in the back.

"Morning. It was my turn to prepare breakfast," he stated and left the pan to pull out one of the chairs by the table, which had already been set with mismatched crockery.

Ros couldn't have felt more welcome.

While he'd spent most of his life in more favorable conditions, in a house with more space and better insulation, there was comfort to being around so many gay men—not in a club setting, not trying to date or hook up—just hanging out, chatting with people he didn't need to hide parts of himself from. For once, he didn't feel like the odd one out, even if he was an outsider in Frank's household.

"Oh! My favorite juice." Ros smiled at Shane and poured himself some of the orange-lemon nectar standing in the middle of the table alongside a jug of water. He'd mentioned it to Shane many times, and while he couldn't be certain whether he was the reason for its presence at breakfast, he still smiled at him when he put the glass to his lips.

Shane's mouth twitched, as if he'd lost the plot, but Frank was there to speak for him. "He drove out early to buy it for you."

Dex put his chin in his hands and sighed, watching Shane with a smirk. "Isn't he just dreamy? I heard he saves kittens on his days off." The mockery couldn't have been clearer, and Ros had to bite his lip not to laugh when Shane hit the back of Dex's head with the spatula.

"Don't listen to them. They just want to embarrass me," he grumbled, returning to the stove to add the final pancakes to the massive portion already stacked on a plate with a deer pattern around the edge.

"Well, I'm grateful that you're making me feel welcome." Ros glanced at the men around him, and while he could feel all their eyes on him, he did his best not to let this intimidate him. "Thank you for letting me stay for now. It's been a tough few weeks."

Dex nodded and sat by the table before shuffling a bit closer in his chair. His collection of tattoos was quite impressive even if it did look like a random assortment from an NC-17 coloring book. "I heard your dad's a total shitbag."

"He is," Frank said in a low, decisive voice, as if he wanted to signal other opinions wouldn't be appreciated. He patted Jag's shoulder, which sent the wild guy crawling into the corner, toward a pile of leather, wool, and fur.

"We don't have to discuss him. Ros needs some rest," Shane insisted, placing the food in the middle of the table before settling in the empty chair close to Ros. Their knees brushed, and while Shane stiffened at first, he did relax into the touch when Ros hadn't moved away.

Ros poured maple syrup over his stack of pancakes and dug in with a smile. "This has to be the best breakfast I've had in weeks."

Jag draped a furry blanket over his shoulders. “You’re skinnier than the last time I’ve seen you. People have to eat more in the winter.”

“He stole two pancakes and claimed he needs to fatten up,” Shane complained as they all watched Jag dress. He dropped the towel to the floor, flashing Ros with his butt, but it didn’t seem erotic in nature, since he quickly covered the bare skin with woolen pants. Shane didn’t even bother to tell him off.

“It’s true. We don’t all live in cushy homes,” Jag said, adding to his wild-meets-junk ensemble bit by bit. Ros wasn’t sure if the style was more caveman or dystopian chic, but the metal elements suggested the latter.

Frank pulled his chair up to the table and poured himself coffee from a large jug. “I’ve invited you to live with us back in the summer. We could have built an extension to the hou—”

Jag shook his head, and Ros had to admit his locks looked very nice after the combing. “A predator who gets too comfortable, dies! I’ll be *ready*, and at the top of the food chain, thanks.”

Dex spread his arms. “Ready for... what?”

But Jag had already stormed out, stomping with his heavy boots. Ros had no idea why anyone might choose to stay somewhere out there in the piles of frozen metal instead of warming their bones by the fireplace. Cerberus barked, reminding Ros of his presence in the pen outside, but his doghouse was properly insulated, and since apparently he wasn’t above helping himself to the food from the table, he wasn’t allowed in the kitchen during meals

“Let’s just leave him a few. If I put the plate on the windowsill, he’ll take them soon,” Frank said, pointing to the pancakes, as if a game of steal-the-food was normal in his house.

Shane gave a low exhale and glanced at Ros, sipping his coffee. He was smooth-shaven, and his skin looked soft without the usual bristles that Ros wanted to brush his fingers against. But they'd decided to take things slow, so he didn't want to tease Shane with his touch only to deny it to him later.

"So what, are you two together, or are you single, Ros?" Dex asked with his mouth full.

"I'm gonna stab you with my fucking fork," Shane mumbled. Instead of digging a knife into Dex's flesh though, he cut through the three pancakes on his plate in a sharp move that made the blade squeak against the porcelain.

Dex snorted so abruptly he had to cover his mouth. "I'm just asking, man."

Ros sighed. "I mean, we're not boyfriends—"

"Ha! See?" Dex pointed at Shane, but watched Ros. "So you're single?"

Shane's gaze burned Ros's cheek, but he said nothing, tensing up like a man awaiting the jury's verdict.

"It's... complicated. I wanna sort my life out first," Ros mumbled, feeling pressure from both sides.

Frank shook his head. "It's fine, Ros. You can tell him you're not interested."

Dex spread his arms. "Why you gotta be such a cock block?"

"Because you'd even fuck a tree if you thought it looked vaguely male," Shane growled.

Dex winked at him. "Don't diss a good tree. Wood is wood."

Ros laughed so hard, juice spurted from his nose. It was the most ridiculous conversation he'd ever heard.

“He’ll grow out of it. Eventually,” Frank said, but he didn’t seem convinced by his own words.

Dex rolled his eyes, chewing with his mouth open. “I keep telling you, you’re starving yourself, uncle. I could get a guy to come over. We wouldn’t have to touch to—”

“Jesus fuck. No,” Frank said and dropped the cutlery to cover his ears.

“How about you eat those as takeout, hm?” Shane asked, pushing the edge of Dex’s plate so hard the other side poked his bare chest.

Dex groaned. “And go where?”

Frank inhaled so deeply his nostrils flared. “There’s pipes to be picked up from Mark Thompson’s farm.”

Dex faced Ros, but did get up. “See? I’m the Cinderfella in this house. Ordered around—”

Shane shook his head. “Just go.”

“Okay, okay,” Dex turned and strutted back into the corridor, showing off his backside in the thin boxer shorts.

“These are so good, Shane. Thank you.” He smiled, stuffing his mouth with more pancakes.

Shane exhaled and grabbed his cutlery again. “Yeah. Sorry they’re so flat, Jag ate the fluffy one.”

“Shane, stop apologizing for everything. I’m sure he’s fine with it,” Frank said curtly.

Ros nodded and stroked Shane’s beautiful hand, hoping it didn’t go against their promise to take things *slow*. “More than fine. I want to pull my weight here. Just tell me what needs doing.”

Shane looked his way, his thick brows high. “You don—”

“I could definitely use some help with keeping the house clean,” Frank interjected, watching Ros with dark, warm eyes. “Simple stuff, like vacuuming or washing the dishes, since most of that always falls on me.”

“Sure! I’ll be more than happy to help out. As soon as I work something out for transport, I’ll try to resume my bar job, and I’ll pay rent. There’s this guy who asked me for a portrait of his mom’s cat. It’s not exactly my specialty, but I’ll try to corner him on that, cause he offered a hundred bucks.”

Frank raised his hand, his face wrinkling when he smiled. “Rent’s not needed, kid. You’re welcome here.”

Shane’s knee pressed against Ros’s, but when their eyes met, Shane stalled, sucking on his bottom lip. “Weren’t you... didn’t you want to return to art? You won’t have time for it if you go to work every single day.”

And there it was, the harsh reality that felt like falling face-first on the sidewalk. Ros focused on the food and washed it down with juice to sweeten the truth of his situation. “I won’t, but what else can I do? I don’t have the cash for materials and I no longer have access to a studio, so it won’t even matter if I have time or not. I guess it was just a fancy pursuit anyway,” he finished quietly, but just thinking about giving up on his dream felt like standing at the edge of a deep well and sensing its cool breath. He might not die without sculpting, but life without it was devoid of color.

“Why don’t you just use some of the junk? I’ve seen people do that on TV,” Frank said after swallowing a mouthful of food.

Shane’s face flushed, and he touched Ros’s hand. “There’s a workshop here too. It’s cluttered and not heated, but... we could clear it out, and get you some gloves or something.”

Ros looked at them, struggling to ignore the frantic heartbeat drumming in his ears. “For real? Don’t you need the stuff for sale or

something?”

Frank waved it off. “Nah, unless you find a diamond ring in there, take whatever you like, and Shane will tell you where... not to go.”

Because of dead bodies decomposing in barrels.

Ros tried not to think about that and smiled. “Wow, I don’t know what to say. Your junkyard is like a gold mine. There’s so much stuff here!”

“Treat it as your personal quarry. There’s so much of the stuff that it really doesn’t matter,” Frank said and made a dismissive motion with his hand.

“Yeah? Does that sound good?” Shane asked, his eyes pinned to Ros’s face.

The tension between them could have been cut with a knife, and Ros itched to lean in for a kiss that would have just complicated things. So he stayed put and smiled.

“I love that.” *I love you.*

If only Ros wasn’t too scared to voice that. Shane’s attempts to ensure he was comfortable proved that he was serious about changing his ways, but they didn’t necessarily mean anything beyond that. Shane might be Ros’s first love, but he’d fallen for him without knowing the truth about Shane’s past, and since their relationship has been Shane’s first attachment following a ten-year prison sentence, it was difficult to predict its longevity. They needed more time to understand each other’s feelings and decide what to do about them.

Frank smiled. “So that’s settled then. I give Dex welding lessons. You can join if you want to.”

Shane cleared his throat and reluctantly took his hand away from Ros’s before packing most of the final pancake into his mouth, as if he wanted to give himself an excuse to avoid speaking.

Ros's heart skipped a beat. So maybe he couldn't afford as many traditional materials as he'd like, but if Frank really was so generous, maybe he could come up with another outlet for his creativity? He'd always wanted to create sculptures that would make the viewer feel small and insignificant in the face of art. And while he'd felt artistically stifled only moments prior, knowing that he did have resources, their limited nature was already making his creativity sparkle.

Shane's profile was so handsome, with a strong brow line and a nose with a bump, but regardless of how difficult it would be to keep his hands to himself around him, Ros had a firm conviction to be a responsible adult. He nudged Shane with his elbow. "Will you show me around after breakfast?"

The tense features relaxed, and Shane squeezed Ros's hand, though it lingered longer than it would have if it were just a friendly gesture.

He swallowed and downed his coffee before flashing Ros one of the handsome smiles that put hooks in his heart at the very start of their relationship. "Yeah. I'm free all day. If you need anything, we could go to the shopping too."

Ros wanted nothing more than to spend all day with Shane, and all night under him. He missed his touch, missed the closeness, missed the kisses. Missed the time before finding out that Shane used to have a hidden agenda. But avoiding the truth wouldn't have gotten him anywhere, so he took away his hand and continued to clear his plate.

The breakfast carried on as they chatted about the junkyard and gossiped about Dex's new flame—a security officer whom Dex had gotten frisky with when caught shoplifting. Frank had a lot of bad things to say about the whole thing.

Once Ros was done washing the dishes, the guys equipped him with winter boots, a coat, gloves, and even a fur hat that was apparently lined

with the fur of a rabbit Jag had hunted and skinned himself.

Cerberus started barking in excitement the moment they stepped out into the cold and the first snowflakes hit their faces.

“We’re coming, boy,” Shane said, gently taking hold of Ros’s shoulder and dragging him off the porch. The dog had spent the evening indoors but, according to Shane, was restless at night, which had prompted the construction of the pen at the back of the house in the first place.

“He must have been kept outside since he was small. Got used to it,” Shane theorized and opened the gate as the black beast stood on its hind legs, resting the front paws on the mesh fence surrounding its home. But once the pen opened, Cerberus spilled out like a wiggly croissant, twisting his body while his long tail wagged at record-breaking speed.

“There you are, boy! How are you?” Shane whispered, rubbing the dog’s side in long strokes.

Ros smiled and scooted next to Cerberus who remembered him very well despite Ros’s long absence “Yes, I know, you love going for walks!” Ros offered the dog a bit of plain pancake, which got Cerberus so excited he snorted with joy as he consumed the treat at record-breaking speed. Ros looked up at Shane. “Have you taught him any tricks yet?”

Shane smirked. “Of course. Look. Cer, *down*. And now *roll*,” he said, watching the dog flawlessly do as he was asked.

Ros laughed, and the dog let out a happy bark as if he were proud of being the reason for such glee. But as excited as Cerberus was about the new person in the pack, when Shane whistled, he instantly focused on his leader. And Ros followed Shane too, drawn by his powerful charisma.

“That’s so good! Do you remember how skinny he was just two months ago?” he asked, itching to slide his arm under Shane’s as if nothing had changed. As if they were still lovers.

“Yeah, he’s doing so good now, aren’t you, boy?” Shane hummed as Cerberus rolled into the fresh snow and showed them his pale belly. “I’d break every tooth of the fucker who left him to die.”

Ros smiled at him as they started walking farther from the house and its heat. The mounds of junk protected them from the worst of the wind, but the snow kept falling as they strode through the landscape of endless artistic possibility. But how was Ros to focus on giving new life to cans, springs, and discarded tyres when Shane was close enough to touch?

“Do you still want to train dogs for a living, like you told me?”

Shane exhaled, watching Cerberus climb a slope and push his long muzzle into an empty mini fridge dumped there. His brows pinched, but after a moment’s pause, he nodded and glanced at Ros. “Yeah. I like dogs. You always know what they’re thinking. They won’t plot against you, use you, or stab you in the back. You treat them right, and they will love you forever.”

Ros bit his lip and pulled the fur-lined hat down to protect his ears from the biting chill. “Did you have a boyfriend in prison?”

Shane’s pace changed, but before Ros could have slowed down to match it, Shane ran up to him, clearing his throat. “There’s no one else, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m just trying to work out... I guess, if you’ve ever been in love.”

Shane sighed and blew air on his gloved hands. “Maybe... when I was still a kid and stupid enough to believe someone might choose me over other people.” He glanced at Ros before picking up a chunk of wood from the side of the road and tossing it for Cerberus to fetch. “In prison... I-uh... I was straight. Nobody knew.”

Ros stared at him in disbelief. “What? Are you telling me you didn’t have sex for ten years?” He couldn’t imagine a fuck machine like Shane

saving himself for that long.

“I did have sex,” Shane interjected with a shake of his head. “Not everyone does, but lots of guys really need it, and with no women in there... it is what it is, right?” he asked, peeking at Ros as if he were seeking his approval.

The cogs slowly moved in Ros’s head despite the cold. “Oh. So sex, but no boyfriends. Was that... okay for you? Was there someone you left behind when you got put away?”

Shane shook his head. “Nope. I didn’t really feel I needed that when I was younger. But it got real lonely in prison, and that’s when I started kinda thinking about all the things I missed out on,” he said, and his green eyes shyly passed across Ros’s face. “I envied those guys who were visited by their wives or girlfriends. Some got lonely and had boyfriends even though they were straight, but... it’s not easy to be gay in there, and I didn’t want to take any chances, you know? Being tender is a trap. Trusting someone else in there—even more of a mistake. It wasn’t like I’d stay there for life.”

Ros nodded, taking it all in. “Trust is really hard after you’ve been hurt.” He glanced at Cerberus, who was happily ripping apart a plastic bag with some ice frozen inside it. “But it looks like *he’s* managed, so maybe it just takes some time and reassurance.”

“He’s a good boy,” Shane told him in a quiet voice, rubbing the front of his coat. “He’s also been lonely. We understand each other.”

Ros was about to say something stupid like I miss you, or I think I could trust you now, but was saved from his own cravings by Shane’s phone, which buzzed with a hip-hop tune Dex must have set for him.

Shane picked up the call with a loud sigh. “Yeah, I’ll be there. No, it’s fine.” He put the cell back into his pocket and turned to Ros. “Dex

needs help with the pipes. If you wanna keep looking around, keep Cer with you, okay? He'll lead you back home."

Ros nodded. "I'll see you later?"

Shane stalled, looking straight at him, and when for a moment he seemed to lean forward, the cold air briefly stopped pinching Ros's cheeks, chased away by the heat from within. But the moment was gone when Shane nodded, stepping away. "Just relax. And if you find something heavy, don't bother with it. I'll help you drag it to the workshop later!"

They shared two more goodbyes, as if Shane couldn't make up his mind about leaving, and while it was a bit silly, it felt nice to know Shane wanted to spend his time with Ros, despite sex not being on the table.

While the cold was pretty miserable, Ros followed Cerberus through the winding corridors of snow-covered trash, he reimagined the junkyard as the charred hills of Hades. The landscape was dangerous and barren, but its guardian was by Rosen's side and would lead him back to safety.

He chatted to Cer, pondering his new life here and his confusion over not knowing where he belonged anymore. He couldn't stand even looking at his dad so moving back with him was out of the question, yet he was also barely settling into an existence where he had to fend for himself.

Shane was his Hades, and he would take Charon's boat to ferry Ros between his two lives. The trip into the unknown might be perilous and end up with a fall into the river Styx, but deep down Ros knew he wanted to take that journey with Shane and see where it led them.

He collected a couple of small items, but while they all fit into his pockets, the broken chair covered by a layer of brass paint would not. Still, intent on getting it out from the rubble, Ros got down to his knees and ignored the way melting snow soaked into his jeans. He tried to pull on the

chair's legs, but the wood creaked in warning, making Ros sit back on his heels and eye his find with growing frustration.

"It's gonna collapse," someone said right behind him.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Ros yelped in panic and slipped on the sheet of metal resting under his foot. Fortunately, Jag was there to catch him.

"Did Shane tell you to spy on me?"

Jag let him go once he made sure Ros was steady on his feet, as if he was some baby bird that had fallen out of its nest.

"No. Why would he? I know what to do."

Ros sighed. "So... what is it that you're doing?"

Jag frowned at him, adjusting the shawl that covered the lower half of his face. Ros had to admit that the guy had the most amazing golden green eyes. "Looking out for you. You're new and weak."

Ros snorted. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Jag said and rose to his feet, jabbing the dull end of his spear into the dirty snow. The sun shone through the brown hair that escaped his fur hood, and in clothes made out of scraps and pieces of metal, he looked like the hero of some great post-apocalyptic movie. Even his weapon was crafted out of scrap metal, as if to prove to Ros what treasures lay buried all around his new home.

"I'm not weak," Ros grumbled nevertheless.

Jag let out a mocking laugh. "Oh, please. One night on your own, and you'd be dead in this weather."

Ros lost the will to argue this useless point. "Since you're already here, would you help me pull this chair out?"

Jag shook his head. "We'd have to start with removing the things around it." He poked the rubble with his spear. "Doable, but I don't see the point. And if you get hurt, Shane will blame *me*."

Ros scratched his chin. “Well... I’ll just tell him it was my idea.”

“He won’t listen. Then again, I don’t know why he just left you on your own like this if you’re his.”

Ros just stared for a while, but then cleared his throat, fighting the sudden sense of urgency in his chest. “Is that what he said? What I’m *his*?”

Jag smirked. “He’d have marked you with his piss if you allowed him to.”

It was so blunt Ros covered his mouth in shock. “I’m not... It’s complicated. I’m not sure where we stand anymore.”

Jag looked him up and down. “For a college boy, you’re not very smart, are you? He wants to claim you and breed you more than he wants to breathe. It’s obvious to anyone with a pair of eyes.”

A flush rushed up Ros’s cheeks. “You know what, I’ll come back for the chair later,” he said quickly and whistled at Cerberus, who came running in an instant.

“Stay on the path!” Jag hollered as Ros rushed away.

His words kept resonating through Ros’s body and making him rattle. Maybe it really was less complicated than he made it out to be?

Claim him.

Breed him.

Oh, God. There was nothing Ros wanted more.

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Chapter 18 – Shane

It had only been a week since Ros had moved into Frank's home, yet Shane already couldn't imagine parting from him again. He might have started their whirlwind romance with ill intentions, but it had transformed everything about his miserable life, and he was set on making things right now that Ros decided to risk it all and rely on Shane.

Whenever he entered the room, his scent gave Shane a rush, as if it were infused with gold, and joy, and coke all at once. But not being able to pull the boy close or kiss him was gradually becoming a dark cloud clinging to Shane's back, cold like a blanket that had just been pulled out of the ocean. Watching his parents' descent into addiction had scared Shane off drugs, but it couldn't have protected him from getting hooked on a boy who had decided to give him another chance.

He'd fucked up and hadn't earned Ros's trust back yet, but that didn't change the fact that it was so damn hard to stay away and *keep things slow* when the boy smelled like a dream and smiled like one too. But breaking his promise to keep things PG would have destroyed all his efforts to be the man Ros deserved, so Shane remained respectful, and kept his hands to himself.

One night, he'd been on the verge of giving in and touching Ros in a way that would have been dangerously close to breaking their unwritten rules. It had been real cold, Frank was out, and Ros had come to watch TV with Shane on the sofa. They ended up sitting under the same blanket and just as Shane sensed the tension rising in a way that would have soon led them into a cuddle, Dex came in to pillage the fridge. The clueless shit ended up staying to watch the show with them, and even forced them to rewatch the first episode.

Shane could have kicked him out, but Ros seemed happy with Dex's presence and the cockblocking atmosphere it provided. So Shane had gone with it to prove he could wait as long as Ros wanted him to. To prove that he wasn't scum.

He must have drifted off, watching the white-capped mounds of junk shimmer in the sun, because the snowball hitting his shoulder came out of nowhere, bursting into cool fluff that hit his bare neck, face, and even got into his hair.

Baffled and ready to defend himself, Shane spun toward the open workshop, only to see Ros squatting to make another projectile with a devilish smile. Oh, could that sweet boy be a demon when he wanted to! In bed, mostly, but seeing him so joyful filled Shane's black heart with happiness so bright the painful past he always carried with him seemed to for once weigh nothing.

"Oh, that's how it is?" he roared and gathered snow into his bare hands, rolling it into a ball. He'd make sure it wasn't too hard, since he didn't want to leave bruises on Rosen's beautiful, pale flesh, but this wasn't the day he'd step away from a fight.

Ros grinned at him and hid behind a car rusted beyond the point of no return. "Shouldn't have been daydreaming on the job!" He laughed and

threw his next snow missile, but his aim wasn't great and Shane didn't need to duck to avoid it before sending a snow cannonball of his own Ros's way. It missed the pompom on his hat by a fraction of an inch and burst when it hit the wall of Frank's workshop, which was currently filled with materials Ros had scavenged for his upcoming project.

"Be careful, or you might just tease me one time too many!"

Ros dashed from behind the car, throwing another snowball at Shane, and proceeded to run along the wall. "You'd have to catch me first!"

Shane sensed blood. And cum. And sweat. But most of all, he anticipated the sweetness of Rosen's kisses as he followed the boy, not losing his pace even when his foot slipped on the fresh snow. Lots of ice had formed by the building, but he used it to his advantage and slid along the frozen puddle. The cold air felt frosty in his nostrils as he caught the back of Rosen's coat and yanked him close.

"You're mine now!"

Ros laughed and wrestled Shane, grabbing his hands, but he only lost balance in the process. They both fell over into the most perfect, fluffy pile of snow, as if this were a 90s rom-com, not the life of an ex-convict and the young, beautiful artist whom he pined for.

Shane ended up with half his body on top of Ros, and they stilled, looking into each other's eyes as if they shared one mind.

Ros's smile softened. "Guess I am..." he whispered with cheeks flushed from the cold, and Shane could have sworn he sensed Ros's heartbeat through the many layers of clothes.

This was his sign to proceed. Ros confirmed his capture and didn't seem at all offended by it. Maybe he'd even played along with this hunting fantasy and let himself be caught on purpose?

Thoughts passed through Shane's mind at breakneck speed as he pushed one hand under Rosen's head, to shield him from the cold snow that made his skin seem even juicier, pinker, warmer.

If Shane bit in, sweetness would end up exploding on his tongue and would nourish him forever. But he stalled, meeting the tender gaze watching him from below, because what if he was just seeing things and would fuck up everything he'd built by going in for an unwanted kiss?

He did promise they'd go slow. Problem was, what did *slow* mean for Ros? Because for Shane, their pace was glacial.

A high-pitched whistle startled them both, but it sounded like yet another of Jag's useless alerts.

"Ignore him," Shane groaned, but Ros was already sliding out from under him.

"No, this is the danger one, it's serious," Ros said, getting to his feet.

Shane wished Jag hadn't explained the intricacies of his whistle and bird call system to Ros, but Jag had insisted it was important for him to know all the signals now that he was a part of their *pack*.

Shane begrudgingly rose and wiped snow off his jeans, assuming that the whistle must have snapped Ros out of yielding to a temptation he might later regret, and provided a handy excuse to break things up. Not that excuses were necessary.

Shane deserved every delay, every missed kiss and touch.

It was a miracle that Rosen still wanted to have anything to do with him at all.

"It's probably a customer. Jag doesn't know how business works."

But as soon as they walked out from behind the workshop, Frank appeared in front of them so abruptly they barely avoided clashing.

“Hide in the house, Ros,” Frank said, and his usual frown transformed into a valley in the middle of his forehead.

Ros glanced back at Shane. “Are you sure...?”

Shane spread his arms, still annoyed that yet another chance at reconnecting with Ros in a way that was even remotely sexual had been thwarted. “Better safe than sorry. Do as Frankie says.” But the moment his boy skirted through the back door of the open workshop, slamming it behind him, he spun back to face his friend. “What is this about?” he asked after taking a deep inhale to subdue the jittery sensation in his muscles. And then he heard it—the buzz of an approaching car.

Frank took off his gloves and led the way to the snow-covered road. “Don’t know, but Jag’s adding the trilling sound, and I don’t like it. He should carry a damn phone, but he refuses to use even the ones for old people.”

“He doesn’t want to use gas for fire by his den, so what do you expect? At least he hasn’t tried shooting arrows at the cell tower nearby,” Shane grumbled and retreated into the workshop to pick up a gun from a secret holder under the wooden table Rosen has been using to screw together tiny bits of steel.

As dismissive as he was of Jag, the wild bastard took security seriously, and if Frank was worried by the stupid signal, then maybe so should he? With the pistol stuck into the back of his pants, Shane stepped into the sun and froze at the sight of a black Mercedes heading toward them while their personal Tarzan followed it by hurrying along the snow-covered slope.

“Shit.”

Frank took a deep breath. “Shit indeed. Do you see the driver?”

The moment Shane's gaze settled on Ed Beck's round face, his brain short-circuited with fury. Did the motherfucker know his son was here? He'd be taking Ros over Shane's dead body. Cerberus started roaring in his pen, as if he'd become aware of his master's distress, but the last thing needed in this equation was another set of sharp teeth.

"No. How dare he come here?" he asked and stepped into the road, his hands shaking with need to hold the gun that now burned his skin.

After everything he'd done to Shane, the bastard had the audacity to park right in front of the fence surrounding Frank's house. Despite the sulphuric fury that was about to burn Shane from the inside, he did stay put and watched Beck struggle to unbuckle his seatbelt.

"Something's off," Frank stated the obvious as Jag made his way down the snowed-over hill of junk with the agility of a wild cat.

Their guest poured out of his fancy car, and the sunshine reflected off the sweat dampening his face despite the cold. He wiped his hands on his slacks and adjusted the brown woolen jacket he wore, as if propriety had any meaning when it came to a man this vile.

But what else could Shane expect from a politician if not false smiles hiding moral rot?

Shane wanted to keep his cool, but when Beck met his gaze and offered a polite smile, the weak gate holding back Shane's fury broke, and he roared. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Frank didn't bother trying to stop him, but he did follow when Shane made his way toward the bastard.

Beck put his hands up, sending a nervous glance at Jag who stood nearby with a spear, looking like a dystopian warrior in his set of furs and scrap that served as make-do chainmail.

“Hold on a second, I know what you’re thinking!” Beck exclaimed, taking a step back, sickly pale under the layer of sweat. “But this is— This will be an opportunity for all involved.”

Shane spat under his shoes, and he might have already sent a fist into Beck’s face if he wasn’t aware of Ros’s presence. The last thing he wanted Ed Beck to fuck up was Shane’s budding relationship with his son, so he steadied himself and rolled his head until the neck creaked. “You have some nerve coming here.”

Beck kept one hand up as he opened the back seat and pulled out a duffel bag. “I know I’ve wronged you. I didn’t expect to see you at the campus either, so I panicked, for which I apologize. But if you’re smart about this, we could let bygones be bygones, and I’ll make sure you feel satisfied about this new arrangement.”

Shane wanted to snap something back, but Beck unzipped the bag, revealing wads of cash that filled the entire thing. Shane could have lived off that amount of money for the rest of his life if he were frugal.

Frank sneered and crossed his arms on his powerful chest. “Who’s in your trunk, Beck?”

Shane stayed still, his eyes on the hypnotizing green prize, but Frank’s question snapped him out of it, and he stepped away, watching the vapor he’d exhaled disperse in the air. Did he really have so little pride that he’d take *anything* from Ed Beck’s sweaty palm?

Beck hissed. “You don’t need to know.”

“Yeah. Yeah, we do, because coming here with that kind of money tells me you’re desperate,” Shane snapped, eyeing the gray hair on Beck’s temples.

Beck took a deep breath and looked to Frank, but when no help came, he dropped the bag to the ground and spread his arms. “It’s my wife, Lisa.

She overdosed at home, and I will *not* see my career wasted just because she couldn't handle her habit. Everyone would fucking think I couldn't keep my own woman in line! And so soon after my son decided to tell everyone he's gay at that. I know we've got bad blood, and I hate how things unraveled years ago, but I'm not asking for charity. I will pay you enough to make up for the time you've lost, but I need this problem gone."

"Your wife? The weather lady?" Shane asked, too dumbfounded to argue with Beck's assumption that money could take away the misery of ten years in prison. It was one thing to push a stranger under the bus, but having a member of your own family dissolved in acid instead of giving them a proper burial was a whole new level of depravity.

This guy could not be Rosen's father.

Beck nodded and started pacing by the side of the car. "I told her to stop snorting that shit, but she said she had her own mind, and now here we are! No one's gonna believe I didn't know," he said as if her dead body really was a problem for all of them.

"You're fucking shitting me! You have all this money, and it didn't occur to you to get her to rehab?" Shane roared and moved toward Beck, but Frank grabbed him by the arm.

Beck scowled, but his face reddened. "That's none of your business. Now, do what I ask and take the damn money!"

Frank nodded. "We'll discuss the options."

Shane saw red. He knew all too well that Frank liked a cushy amount of money but to serve Ed Beck again in any way? "Like hell we will!"

"We *will*. It's too much cash to ignore." Frank pulled on Shane's arm as if he wanted to rip it off, but the way he squeezed it three times cooled Shane's head just enough to abandon the instinctual drive to punch the fucker who messed up his life.

“Fine,” he said and faced Jag. “Keep an eye on him!”

Jag nodded and scooted down like an obedient dog.

Shane’s legs were stiff and heavy as lead pipes on the short way to the door, but once he stepped into the warm kitchen, the air felt almost too rich, and his head spun a bit.

“What the fuck? Frank, are you shitting me?” he uttered, stalling when his eyes met Ros’s.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The boy was as pale as fresh snow. “I overheard most of it,” he uttered. “This is insane. He’s even worse than I imagined.”

Frank put his hand on Ros’s shoulder. “Calm down. We need to consider how to handle this, and I’m not having *that* conversations in front of him. Shane, I’m not saying I want it, but that bag is *full*. We’ll do what *you* want, because you’ve got the right to that choice, but think it through.”

Shane stepped back, rubbing the shaved sides of his head as the rock in his throat grew. “What? I don’t need his money. I—” His gaze landed on Rosen’s ashen face again, and his heart sank.

This boy deserved more than a tiny, cold room in the junkyard. His life had taken a turn for the worse because of Shane’s thirst for revenge, so maybe giving up on getting back at Beck altogether would adequately prove that he had changed?

A part of Shane worried Rosen might disappear from his life the moment he improved his circumstances, but he had every right to make his own choices about relationships.

It hurt to imagine that the boy might leave him behind, but Shane was not scum and didn’t want a partner who only stayed with him because he had no other prospects.

“Maybe we could make him gift the cash to Ros? He could finish his university, have a fresh start.”

Shane wasn't broke just yet, but he'd been burning through the cash Frank had saved up for him over the years at a rapid pace. Between vet bills for Cerberus, what he'd paid Ros's old landlord, and other expenses, he wasn't in a position to help the boy finish his education, no matter how much he wanted to.

Frank raised his eyebrows, stilling. “Wasn't exactly what I had in mind—”

But Shane's attention was on Ros who stepped closer, and grabbed Shane's hand, making his heart beat faster. So maybe this *would be* a missed opportunity to once and for all destroy Ed Beck, but the adoration with which Ros looked at him in that moment was worth more than the junkyard would have been if it were made of gold.

“No... Shane,” Ros uttered, squeezing Shane's hand harder. “I don't want his dirty money. Not after finding out what he did to you. He'll never be punished for his crime from years ago, but he *could* be tried for *this*. He's sick in the head and so entitled I can't believe it's even possible. We should call the cops so he can rot in prison forever.”

Shane stared at him, but when the handsome face didn't disperse into a blurred image straight from his drunken imagination, it sank in that Rosen was serious. That he really wanted to give Shane his closure instead of accepting the money that would have allowed Ros to live in the comfort he was used to.

Emotion broke over Shane like a wave, and he uttered, “Are you serious?”

Rosen nodded, but before he could have voiced anything, Shane dove in and pressed their lips together.

The ground could have cracked under their feet, and he wouldn't have noticed with the fireworks exploding inside his skull. Ros didn't back away or slap him, and instead opened his lips in invitation, as if he'd also waited for this very moment for way too long. He wrapped his arms around Shane's neck, stepping even closer so they could press against each other as their tongues found a way to communicate without words.

Even Frank's sarcastic slow clap couldn't take Shane out of this triumphant moment.

"How very unexpected," Frank said. "Is that the final decision? We're busting him?"

Shane looked down at Ros, his flesh so hot he could barely think, but when the boy's eyes grew more intense, he choked out, "Yeah. It's our final decision. Let's give him justice."

Frank shook his head. "Okay. Your call, Shane. But you both stay here."

"And you won't get in trouble if the police come over here?" Ros asked, never letting go of Shane's hand.

Frank waved off his concern. "I've made some friends with badges over the years. We'll be fine," he said and ventured across the house. Each creak the floor made under his weight was like a splinter pushing into Shane's skin, but he wouldn't move, enchanted by the flush on Rosen's cheeks.

The moment Frank left through the back door though, Shane's lips were back on Rosen's, and they stumbled at the nearest wall, their hands rolling up and down bodies covered by too much fabric.

"I missed you," Ros uttered between one kiss and another, unzipping Shane's jacket in a frenzy. They hadn't discussed how far they wanted this

to go, yet despite Rosen's father outside, Shane had a feeling they were on the same page.

He stepped on his boot and lifted his knee to pull his foot out before doing the same with the other, and ditched his outerwear as soon as it was open.

"I dream about you every night. Can't stand being apart," Shane whispered, nudging Rosen toward the small bedroom. The last thing he needed was Frank walking in on them, but even if they had enough time alone, what he required to fulfill his dreams was lube. And its location in the top drawer was about the only thing he remembered in that moment.

Ros backed into the corridor, his blue eyes piercing Shane with their warm glow. His earlier pallor was making way for a flush, and he couldn't have been more beautiful than in the moment when he stepped into the shadow of the partition wall.

"I know we shouldn't right now... but I really want to," he whispered as if his dad could have overheard him outside.

So maybe Shane did get to ruin Rosen Beck after all. Just not in the way he'd expected.

"I don't care. I just need you. It's been so fucking long, baby," Shane said, pushing Ros against the door.

"Too long," Ros agreed, nodding so fervently hair fell into his face, and he leaned in for another kiss. Shane's tongue felt cool when compared to the lush heat of that pretty mouth, but when he pressed on the handle, they both rolled into the narrow space, which was colored a bright yellow by the curtain left to obscure the window.

The predator in him roared in triumph, because he'd now trapped his prey someplace he couldn't run from, but the side of Shane that so

desperately wanted to be desired by this boy took its time to look into the blue eyes for the final confirmation.

“Want to be inside you.”

Ros kicked the door shut behind them and pulled Shane to the bed. “You’ve got no idea how badly I need that. You’re my first, my only, and I love you so much.”

Shane stalled, baffled by the declaration, but it was as if all the lights that had previously been dimmed inside him exploded with brightness at the same moment. He pushed his fingers into the long hair at the back of Rosen’s head and smiled, his heart pulsing with warmth. “Me too, baby. You’re the only one who ever counted.”

"I want to trust you," Ros whispered, his eyes like pools of warm blue water Shane could enjoy forever.

This boy was nothing like the men Shane had spent so many years with in prison, and that was exactly what he needed from a partner. Soft and pretty, like a flower blooming among weeds, Ros was someone Shane would cherish forever.

And to make the declaration yet more delicious, Ros’s skilful fingers were already on Shane’s zipper. His touch made Shane’s head light, because all the blood from his upper body rushed between his legs, filling up his cock until it stiffened and poked at the beautiful hands through underwear.

“You can trust me,” Shane said and reached to the nightstand, rummaging through it until he found lube with a soft sound of triumph.

Ros kissed his chin but was already turning around on the bed. “I want it fast and rough. You do that so well,” he whispered, making Shane’s balls tighten. He didn’t bother taking off his sweater and lowered his jeans instead.

Getting to see that gloriously pert ass again made Shane flush with desire, and he got onto the bed, rubbing his trapped length against the bare skin presented to him with so much generosity. Breathless, he pushed his hand up Ros's spine, under his top, and pressed down, making him rest his head on the bedding while his hips remained high, teasing Shane.

"Oh fuck, yes... baby, I'm gonna do you so good," he uttered, watching Ros's hard prick swing between the open thighs, just above his lowered pants.

If Shane had time he would have taken Ros to the shower and eaten the pink pucker hiding in the crack of his ass, but his lust was focused on connecting fast, like Ros had asked him to.

Ros looked over his shoulder, his eyes so seductive Shane could hardly stand that he wasn't balls-deep in that sweet body yet.

"Let's do it bare?"

This question would have given Shane an erection even if he were bleeding out, and he nodded, blinded by lust that had him squirting way too much lube onto Ros's hole. The boy shivered, gathering the sheets in his hands, but Shane wasted no time, and when the greedy pucker winked at him, he pushed in two fingers. "Oh fuck... yes... I'm... I've been checked, baby. It's all safe," he promised as the hot channel of Ros's ass squeezed around the digits.

"I've only ever been with you," Ros assured him in a whisper so fiery Shane barely restrained himself from pushing in already. Out of all the men Shane had fucked, Ros was the most beautiful, the sweetest, the most tempting, and the only one who'd managed to start a fire deep in Shane's cold chest. And now he'd get to keep him forever. If he managed to prove himself worthy of Ros.

Shane would make it his life's goal.

His fingers moved in the relaxed opening with ease as he squeezed his dick and pressed his cockhead to the pale buttock, right next to where his digits disappeared inside Rosen's willing body. He couldn't think, and at this point even breathing seemed difficult, but when Rosen looked back again, eyes dark with lust, and lips open to suck in air, Shane aligned his cock with the hole and pushed.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," Ros whimpered, closing his eyes. "Just like that..."

Just imagining old Beck out there in the cold, unaware that he was awaiting the cops while Shane fucked his son and planned his downfall could have made him come. He had to grab the base of his dick to keep himself in check, because his boy asked for a plowing and that was exactly what he'd get.

Long hair spread on the comforter around Rosen's pink face, and when the boy's features relaxed in pleasure, Shane took it as his cue and pushed on at a steady pace, no matter what his instincts and Ros were telling him. It was only once the rounded buttocks flattened against his groin that he slapped the side of Ros's thigh, delighted by the noise it made.

The boy was so tight around him. So warm. And he could feel it all through the fog in his brain. "Fuck...you're the best thing that ever happened to me," Shane uttered, forcing his eyes open because the sight of his dick buried deep in that pretty ass was too good to forego.

He grabbed the meaty sides of Ros's thighs and moved slowly at first, already dazed by the prospect of creaming that greedy hole. This could easily compete with the moment he'd stepped beyond the gates of prison. After weeks of dreaming about Ros accepting all of him and begging for more, the visions were coming true.

Seeing the boy stretch, and then pant felt like reaching the pinnacle of pleasure, and Shane wasn't even close to coming yet. The anticipation built up in the past two months sharpened his senses, and as he leaned forward in an effort to bury himself deeper in that sweet, warm body, the tremor he felt in response resonated throughout him like lightning. Ros fell face-first onto the mattress, his knees rolled farther apart, and Shane followed him down, covering him with his own body as they collapsed.

He could sense every deep breath and moan the boy uttered as he quickened the pace in which he slapped his hips against Ros's buttocks while the boy clutched at the bedding, arching into Shane like a cat in heat. Every move he made had sparks of excitement going up Shane's dick, and all the way to his balls as he sawed into the inviting hole, not holding back anymore, because he had no doubt they'd be doing this again by evening.

Burying his face in the sweet-scented mane, Shane pushed his arms under Ros and held him tight as his hips worked hard and fast. The delicious sensation of that young, lovely body shivering and rocking each time Shane pinned it with his dick took his breath away. Sweat perfumed the air as they rolled in unison, overcome by passion that Shane hadn't experienced with anyone else. Both dirty and wholesome at the same time, Ros was what Shane hadn't even realized he needed a few months ago.

"Oh yes, right there, fuck me just like that," Ros whined when Shane changed the angle of his movements, and having him lose control like that only spurred on Shane's lust. "I'm gonna come!" he cried out, rocking that perfect ass against Shane and meeting his every thrust.

He turned his face to the side, presenting Shane with the loveliest picture of his flushed face, covered by strands of wavy hair and tinted by arousal.

Hot vapor burst in Shane's head, and he reached under Ros's belly, grabbing his dick and thrusting into him hard at the same time. Rosen quivered, dug his knees into the mattress and uttered a choked sound, shaking as his cock pulsed in Shane's hand, releasing jets of cum. Its scent was an aphrodisiac, and Shane buried his face in the crook of Ros's shoulder while his balls tightened and rapid heat consumed the entirety of his body.

And to make this moment the absolute best orgasm in his entire fucking life, the cops chose that moment to switch on the siren.

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Chapter 19 – Ros

Ros pressed his sweaty forehead against the pillow with a happy groan. Shane's cock still pulsed inside him, pumping hot cum, and the relief of being back together combined with the orgasm and the adrenaline of knowing his father was outside and about to be arrested.

He felt no guilt over making that decision, because on his personal scale of evil, treating other people as pawns was as low as one could go. He didn't want to have anything to do with the man whose surname he carried, but this guy who lived in the junkyard and watched Ros with such reverence? He'd cradle him inside his heart any day.

"Yes," Shane uttered in a broken whisper, pressing his hips hard against Rosen's buttocks. His arms tightened against Ros's quivering flesh, and his lips kept moving across damp skin, as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of Rosen's sweat.

"You feel so good." Ros rocked his ass against Shane for good measure, but with the sirens now blaring right outside their house, it was obvious they needed to dress.

They had a lot of time ahead of them. Hopefully, a *forever*.

With the way Shane looked at him as his cock shrunk and slipped out of Rosen's hole, this prospect seemed as real as the tangled sheets under

their bodies, no matter how different their lives had been so far.

“I’ll take care of you,” Shane whispered, still lingering next to Ros and stroking his thigh. His Adam’s apple worked, as if he were swallowing a whole bottle of wine, but there was no hesitation in his soft gaze when he settled it on Ros. “Because I love you too.”

The words were like the softest lip balm on painfully dry lips, and Ros made a lazy turn, finding it hard to get up with some post orgasmic shivers still coursing through his body. “It means you have to be on your best behavior and never go to prison again.”

Shane stalled, his face tensing, but then his mouth stretched into a small smile, and he rolled off the bed, pulling up his pants. “Okay. You’re my master now.”

Ros laughed out loud, cleaning himself with tissues and putting his clothes in order even though he was already fantasizing about rolling into bed with Shane and hugging skin to skin. “I’m liking the sound of that. Let’s go.” As soon as he was up, he grabbed Shane’s hand and pulled on it, eager to find out what the yelling outside was about.

Shane looked down at their hands as they stepped into the living room area, where the shrieks were almost as loud as Cer’s barking. The sirens might have stopped, but there was still an awful lot of noise outside.

He cleared his throat, and his handsome face twitched. “So... about *this*—”

Ros’s heart froze, and he stilled with his hand on the door handle. “What about this? You do... want to, right?”

“Yeah. Do you?” Shane asked, squeezing Rosen’s hand as if he were afraid a tornado would spontaneously form and take him away.

Ros leaned in to kiss Shane, suddenly aware of the new reality he was about to step into. Being with Shane would forever change the

trajectory of Ros's life, but the past months had already been transformative.

"Yes. You're the only one for me, and we'll make it work," Ros said and watched a new kind of vulnerability glint in Shane's green eyes. He was well aware of Shane's many flaws, no matter how much he tried to be a good friend and partner, but as long as they wanted to be together, there would be no obstacle they couldn't conquer.

With a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, Shane pushed the door open, and they stepped straight into a scene out of Harlene's favorite crime dramas. Only this time, the man held against the side of the car and getting his hands cuffed at the back was none other than Ed Beck, Rosen's father.

"Do you know who I am? I told you this is a misunderstanding! Those people here sold her the poison!" Dad roared, twitching against the policeman, who remained admirably calm while his partner looked at something in the back of Dad's car.

Ros felt a giddy shiver go down his spine at the thought of justice finally catching up with the villain of this crazy story. Shane might be stronger, and have more street smarts, but Ros still felt protective of him and wanted to give back as much as his lover was willing to offer him.

Ros was still flushed from the fuck when they walked outside, and while it seemed to him that everyone could guess what he and Shane had been up to moments ago, he didn't care anymore. In fact, he *wanted* his father to see that Shane—the man Dad had discarded years ago—had claimed his son.

Frank was talking to an officer, but his thick brows rolled up when he noticed them holding hands. The cop looked back, and after lifting his

gaze from their entwined fingers real fast, he focused on the building instead. “Is there anyone else on the property?”

Jag was nowhere to be seen, but in the moment Ros took to consider whether he should lie to a lawman, Shane was quick to say. “Just us.”

“Rosen. I’m so glad to see you,” Dad tried when the cop pulled him off the hood of the car, already cuffed. “I know you’re embarrassed of your step-mother’s drug habit, but you need to tell them the truth.” His pale eyes communicated that he’d give Ros all the riches in the world if he only did as asked. His hair seemed lighter than usual against the dark flush on his skin, and if Ros didn’t know him, then the man in front of him would have been the perfect caricature of corruption. Dad even wriggled in the cuffs like a human-sized maggot.

But Ros was done playing a game with his dad. He’d made his choice back around Christmas, and he’d reaffirmed it by being the one to propose calling the police. He wanted nothing to do with Ed Beck and everything he represented.

Ros shook his head. “She told me you encouraged it. That you liked to snort together at times.” *That* was a lie, but when he thought of what Dad had done to Shane, all he wanted was to ensure this monster in a suit would spend the rest of his life behind bars.

Air filled Dad’s chest under the coat, making the garment tighten around him, but then shock was replaced with fury, and he roared. “You fucking liar! Who’d believe a pervert like you anyway?”

The cop holding him didn’t even spare Rosen a glance and tugged Dad toward the police car. A day like any other for him, Ros supposed, but the cop who’d just been taking Frank’s statement approached, his full lips pursing under a thin moustache. “And you are?”

“I’m his son, Rosen Beck,” he offered, not so confident anymore when put on the spot. “I live here now, so maybe he thought I’d help him get rid of Lisa. But I wouldn’t! She deserves better.”

“He’s trying to get back at me,” Dad hollered as the other cop pushed him into the back of the police vehicle. “All because his lifestyle doesn’t agree with my beliefs! He is not a reliable witness!”

The cop speaking to them didn’t react to the shouting and took Shane’s name. “I’ll need to take your statements separately.”

Ros nodded and let go after a moment of struggle against the need to hold on to his man. A sense of utter loss blew into his face when Shane accompanied the cop, but Frank appeared at his side out of nowhere and patted him on the shoulder.

“You did good.”

Ros took a deep breath, glancing up Frank’s firm chest. “Thank you for everything. Me and Shane... we’re back together.”

Frank snorted. “No shit. You’ve got that freshly fucked look all over your face.”

Ros covered his cheeks, for a second taking it literally. “We’ll probably need a place of our own.”

“You’ll work it out,” Frank said, and his confidence unwound some of the tension in Rosen’s body.

Frank was right. Where there was a will, there was a way. He and Shane would work out whatever stood in their way in the future, because they cared for each other and wanted to stay together.

Ros wouldn’t let *anything* stand in their way.

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Epilogue – Ros

When Rosen had chosen Shane over his father, he'd given up on some things that had felt obvious to him for most of his life. A good start. Connections. Money. An easy entry into the art world.

He still believed in his talent and expected to find employment in the sector if he worked hard, but if someone had told him his sculpture would be presented in the most prestigious *New and Upcoming Artists* exhibition in the state only a few months later, he wouldn't have believed them.

Thanks to Shane's support, he'd been free to look for a part-time job in a gallery whose owner took a liking to him. Rosen originally hadn't had much hope of this acquaintance furthering his goals in any way, but Mr. Porter eventually asked to see photos of Rosen's junk sculptures, and the rest was history.

The discreet glances cast his way suggested Dad's widely-publicized downfall might have had something to do with the prominent space dedicated to Rosen in the exhibition's catalogue. Everyone loved an artist with a juicy backstory, and he wasn't above milking his family situation for all it was worth, if it furthered his goals. "Wow, there's so many fancy people here," Harlene whispered. In her little black dress and cool rectangular earrings, she fit right in with the local socialites wandering

around with flutes of champagne. “This could really be something, Ros. I’m so excited for you!”

Ros had lost touch with her for a bit during the terrible weeks after Christmas, but he eventually reached out, and they’d reconnected right away. She’d even come in early today in order to help him set everything up, and while Ros couldn’t be a hundred percent sincere with her due to Shane’s *job*, that wasn’t necessary in order for their friendship to bloom again.

“I’m just so happy to be showing off my work. It’s been long in the making, and I feel like having access to all the junk gave me a new perspective on what I can do with my creativity.”

Having always worked with clay and other traditional materials, he hadn’t considered how much a reclaimed medium like scrap could contribute to the end result with its different textures, shades, and the sheer fact of what it was. The material added a new dimension to the massive figure standing in the very middle of the exhibition space, as if it were its centerpiece.

Rosen had worked on it like a demon, inspired by the many times he’d secretly compared himself to Persephone and her descent into the underworld. The seven-foot-tall sculpture of Hades was a chunk of scrap metal, both polished and rusted, with a glass crown, and his faithful Cerberus, made of used tyres, crouched at the feet. The face had been modelled after Shane’s handsome, strong features, even if stylized, and seeing it from his corner of the massive room made Ros once again look around in search of his man. He and the others had a job to do tonight, of the kind Rosen preferred to not know much about, but he’d been promised that they would make it.

Despite their relationship having such a bumpy start and dark moments Ros didn't like to think of, so far Shane hadn't gone back on his promises and was proving himself to be boyfriend of the year. So much so, that they were working on a little house of their own not far from Frank's. The process was very hands-on. They'd had to move whole piles of rubble and junk to clear the area, but Ros wasn't complaining when he got land and some of the materials for close to nothing, courtesy of Frank and his junkyard that kept on giving. Shane also offered him complete freedom when it came to designing their home, and while Ros wasn't an architect, and they'd ended up purchasing a prefabricated home, he had it customized and was still working on the interiors.

"Is he coming?" Harlene asked, voicing Rosen's concerns, but when he checked his phone, there were no new messages.

His lips dried, but as badly as he wanted to call Shane, he didn't want to risk doing it at the wrong moment, because some of the people Frank had arrangements with were dangerous. Always there for Ros, Shane wouldn't have missed this exhibition without a good reason, and the fact that he wasn't the—

Three men stepped into the gallery, looking out of place despite their elegant outfits. Dex presented weirdly formal in the slim-fit burgundy suit that showcased the tattoos trailing up his neck, Frank seemed utterly trapped in his black dress shirt, but Shane... Shane was like a dashing movie star who'd just stepped out of his limo in a dark blue suit jacket, a crisp white shirt, and black pants.

His hair was always quite tidy, but he'd been to the barber's before coming over to steal Ros's heart once again.

"You made it!" Rosen's legs took him to his friends, and he welcomed them with a big smile.

Dex grinned, adjusting the cuffs of his shirt. “This is the gayest event I’ve ever been to. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Frank cleared his throat and released another button of his shirt, as if he had trouble breathing in anything that wasn’t loose-fitting, but he excused himself and ventured toward the refreshments. Shane brushed the backs of his fingers against Rosen’s and greeted Harlene with a smile.

“After this is over, let’s all have dinner. Dex found some fancy place and booked it for us. My treat.”

Ros smiled and kissed Shane, not caring that they were out in the open, because neither of them was willing to hide their sexuality anymore. “And there I was, thinking I’d never taste luxury again in my life.”

Shane gave an awkward laugh, but squeezed his hand, going red. “Well... you know... it’s fancy but not like... millionaire fancy.”

Which probably meant they’d go to a nice independent restaurant, but Rosen would even take a cheap fast-food place over living off his dad’s money.

He gave his man another kiss and gestured to his sculpture. “How do you like it in all its glory, my Hades?”

Shane cleared his throat and glanced at Harlene. She must have gotten the hint and excused herself, leaving them to face the towering form of the God of the Underworld. Shane had seen it many times before, and had even helped adjust the workshop’s ceiling to create more space for the head, but its majesty hit differently here, among beautiful paintings, sculptures, and other works of art, admired by people who earned Shane’s yearly wage in a week.

His hand was sweaty in Rosen’s, but he didn’t let go and took in all the intricacies of Hades’s steel-and-tyre robes. “This is what you want,” he whispered in the end.

Ros stroked Shane's arm, feeling all mushy inside. "*This* is what I want."

A soft gasp escaped Shane's mouth, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he regarded the sculpture for the longest time. "I was worried that you had to give up on so much for me. And that you would end up regretting it. But maybe it's gonna be all right after all?"

Ros took his time to answer because he didn't want to offer Shane empty words. "There's been hard times along the way, but I chose you, and I keep choosing you every day."

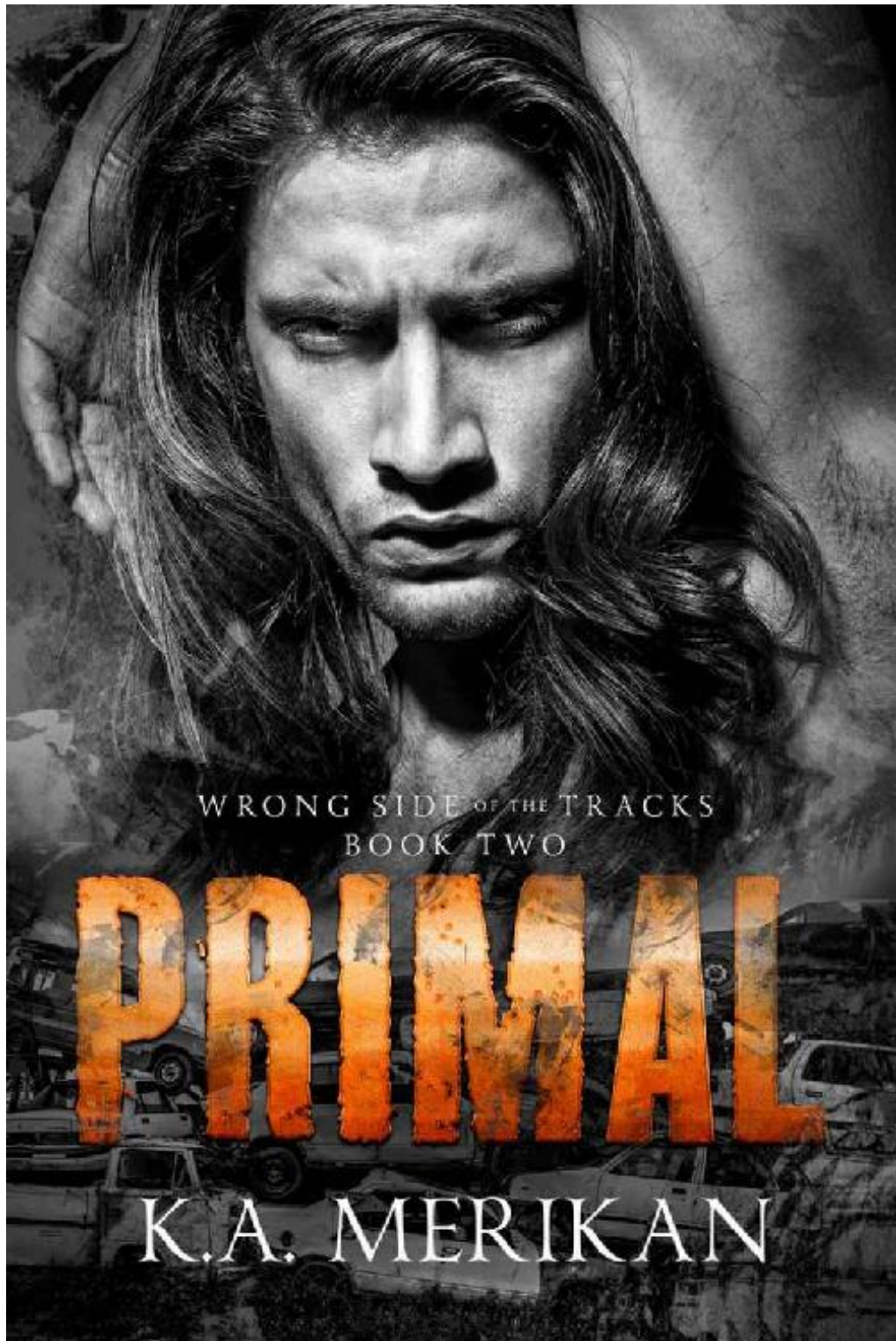
A soft shiver passed through Shane, but he smiled, watching Ros with eyes shining like two copper coins covered with patina. "And I will spend every day of my life trying to be the guy you want to choose."

Ros's heart couldn't have been fuller.

The end

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Next in the Series – Jag's story!



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Thank you for reading SCUM. If you enjoyed your time with our story, we would really appreciate it if you took a few minutes to leave a review on your favorite platform. It is especially important for us as self-publishing authors, who don't have the backing of an established press.

Not to mention we simply love hearing from readers! :)

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Feel My Pain

K.A. Merikan

—Two enemies cursed to feel each other’s pain.—

Zane. “I will burn your life to the ground.”

Roach. “I’m a cockroach. I’ll survive.”

Two years ago, the Rabid Hyenas MC ripped Zane apart like a pack of starving wolves. But he’s not only a survivor, he took revenge that same night.

Turns out, one of the bikers is still alive, and as long as that’s the case, Zane will not know peace. Especially since Roach is the dirtbag who caused all the mayhem in the first place.

When an act of revenge meant to close that chapter of Zane's life takes a shocking turn, all hell breaks loose.

Roach's pain is his.

When Roach bleeds, he does.

When Zane suffers, Roach screams.

So until Zane can figure out how to lift the curse and kill Roach, he's stuck caring for the dumbass who drinks too much, works like a dog, and hasn't moved on an inch since he lost his motorcycle club.

But Roach has other plans for the man twisting his miserable life around. For him, Zane is hope, lust, and love combined, so Roach will gladly stay bound to him forever.

Even if it kills them.

Dirty, dark, and delicious, "Feel My Pain" is a gritty M/M dark romance novel with magical elements and a happy ending. Prepare for violence, intense jealousy, and scorching hot, emotional, explicit scenes.

POSSIBLE SPOILERS:

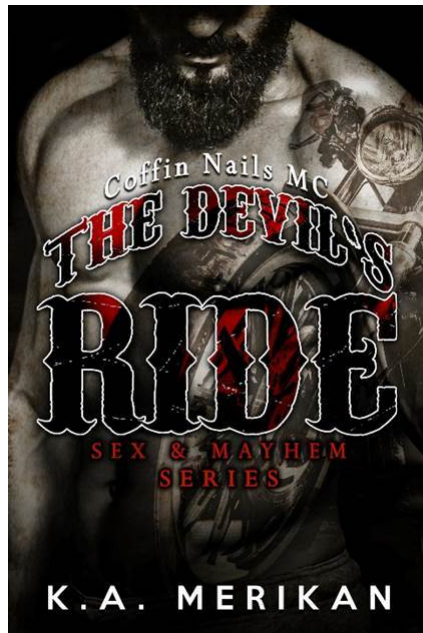
Themes: Enemies to lovers, forced proximity, magical bond, revenge, poverty, disability, small town, vulnerability, versatile lovers

Length: ~110,000 words (Standalone novel)

WARNING: This story contains scenes of violence, offensive language and morally ambiguous characters as well as sensitive topics of child abuse,

addiction, and suicide

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The Devil's Ride

Sex & Mayhem series

K.A. Merikan

--- You don't fuck with the club president's son. ---

Tooth. Vice President of the Coffin Nails Motorcycle Club. On a neverending quest for vengeance. The last thing he needs is becoming a permanent babysitter for a male hooker.

Lucifer. Fallen. Lost. Alone.

After a childhood filled with neglect and abuse, followed by his mother's suicide, Lucifer set out into the world alone. There was nothing for him out there other than taking it one day at a time. As the bastard son of the Coffin

Nails club president, Lucifer never got much fatherly love. So when the Nails show up at the strip joint Lucifer works in, the last thing he expects is to be put in the custody of Tooth, the Nails Vice President famous for his gruesome interrogation techniques. The man proves to be the sexiest beast Lucifer has ever met. He's also older, straight, and an itch Luci can't ever scratch.

Tooth's life came to a halt twelve years ago. His lover got brutally murdered, police never found the perpetrators, and all leads were dead ends. To find peace and his own justice, Tooth joined the Coffin Nails, but years on, he's gotten nowhere with the case, yet still lives on with the burning fire for revenge.

Babysitting a deeply scarred teenager with a talent for disappearing is the last thing on his bucket list. He promised himself to never get attached to someone like him again. To make sure the openly gay boy is safe in the clubhouse, Tooth is stuck keeping an eye on him. The big, blue, attention seeking gaze is drawing Tooth in, but fucking the president's son is a complete no-go, even when both their feelings go beyond lust.

What Tooth doesn't know is that Lucifer might hold the key to the closure Tooth so desperately needs.

POSSIBLE SPOILERS:

Themes: Prostitution, Outlaw Motorcycle Club, organized crime, homophobia, family issues, coming out, discipline/punishment, organ snatching, hurt-comfort, age gap

Genre: contemporary gay erotic dark romance

Length: ~ 125,000 words (Standalone novel, no cliffhanger.)

WARNING Contains adult content: a gritty storyline, sex, explicit language, violence and abuse. Inappropriate use of dental tools and milk.

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AUTHOR'S NEWSLETTER

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Road of No Return by K.A. Merikan

Guns n' Boys Book 1 by K.A. Merikan

All Strings Attached by Miss Merikan

The Art of Mutual Pleasure by K.A. Merikan

Please, read the instructions in the welcoming e-mail to receive your free book :)

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We have started the account to support our more niche projects, and if that's what you're into, your help to bring these weird and wonderful stories to life would be appreciated. In return, you'll get lots of perks and fun content. Win-win!

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About the author

K.A. Merikan are a team of writers always eager to explore the murky waters of the weird and wonderful, K.A. Merikan don't follow fixed formulas and want each of their books to be a surprise for those who choose to hop on for the ride.

K.A. Merikan have a few sweeter M/M romances as well, but they specialize in the dark, dirty, and dangerous side of M/M, full of bikers, bad boys, mafiosi, and scorching hot romance.

FUN FACTS!

- We're Polish
- We're neither sisters nor a couple
- Kat's fingers are two times longer than Agnes's.

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